

BEEN READIN



2012 - 2017

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Exordium

I read *A Confederacy of Dunces* once. After finishing it, I realised I'd read it before - way back, as a teenager with similar social skills to Ignatius. In case you've never felt this sensation: it is a dire one, *deja vu* crossed with a stubbed toe. I felt myself draining away; I saw my meander as the circular, witless thing it had been.

I decided to review every book I read. This was a very good decision for a few reasons (not just posterity); I am vain and this vanity, with my inbuilt curiosity, has driven me on to a hundred books a year. And to this.

The period happens to cover me making my way from complete technical ignorance to an extremely technical profession, which might be of more general interest than my opinions. I had nine jobs in this period (bookseller, procurement analyst, statistician, data analyst, database developer, C# / MEAN developer, PHP developer, Angular developer, and data scientist), completed a Master's, half a Bachelor's, and fell in love twice.

There hopefully won't be another of these books. Hopefully I'll do something of consequence. But if I don't, be sure to do something yourself. There's always been a glut of bugger all.

- Gavin

Scores

1/5:	<i>No.</i>	(Significantly ugly, false, or derivative.)
2/5:	<i>Meh.</i>	(Not worth your time unless you're a fan.)
3/5:	<i>Skim.</i>	(Worth reading in places.)
3*/5:	<i>Mind candy.</i>	(4* but for fun things.)
4/5:	<i>Good.</i>	(Well worth one good readthrough.)
4*/5:	<i>Altering.</i>	(Exceptional, but just the once.)
5/5:	<i>Inexhaustible.</i>	(A life companion, a 'vade mecum'.)

I also started using Julia Galef's magnanimous typology of ways books can affect you:

Data 1	that provide a window on a interesting piece of the world	<i>e.g. Hillbilly Elegy, The Power Broker, Courtroom 302</i>
Data 2	that present surprising case studies, "What is implied, that X could happen?"	<i>e.g. Extraordinary Popular Delusions, The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat</i>
Data 3	that highlight patterns in the world	<i>Anti-intellectualism in American Life, Bowling Alone, On Bullshit, Better Angels...</i>
Theory 1	with a model of how something works	<i>Thinking Fast & Slow, Origin of Species,</i>
Theory 2	with a model of what makes something succeed or fail	<i>Zero to One, Film as Film, Democracy in America, Seeing Like a State</i>
Theory 3	that point out a problem	<i>Bad Pharma, Breaking the News</i>
Theory 4	that make predictions	<i>Superintelligence, Age of Em, End of History.</i>
Theory 5	that give you a general concept or lens you can use to analyze many things	<i>Strategy of Conflict, Black Swan, A Pattern Language, Small Worlds, Clock Long Now.</i>
Values 1	that make explicit arguments about values	<i>Against Democracy, Genealogy of Morals, Doing Good Better, A Theory of Justice</i>
Values 2	that are thought experiments for you to reflect on how you feel about something	<i>Brave New World, Age of Em, An Inspector Calls</i>
Values 3	that express a holistic value structure, letting you experience it from the inside	<i>Atlas Shrugged, Walden, The Trial, Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy</i>
Style 1	that teach principles of thinking directly	<i>How to Solve It, Language Truth & Logic, Philosophical Investigations, Intuition Pumps</i>
Style 2	get a style of thinking by studying the author's approach to the world	<i>Surely You're Joking Mr. Feynman, Freakonomics, Godel Escher Bach</i>
Style 3	aesthetics that obliquely make you a more interesting, generative thinker	<i>Labyrinths, Invisible Cities, Arcadia, Aha! Insight.</i>



(c) Leland Holiday (2010)

Came back from Tanzania, where I'd been stuck with the same 5 hard books for 3 months - *Does Foreign Aid Really Work?*, *Philosophical Investigations*, Lipsey's *Mathematical Economics*, Crawford & Imlah's *Scottish Verse*, and *Beyond Good and Evil* - I binged a bit, re-reading old favourites. (This included three different books with "How To" in the title, but they're much better than that might suggest.) Also got a job in a bookshop, so, y'know.

OCTOBER 2012

- **Monogamy** (1996) by Adam Philips. Casually radical bunch of aphorisms questioning our automatic pair-bonding. Every page has something to raise or furrow yr eyebrows.

4/5

- **Bring the Noise** (2007) by Simon Reynolds. My favourite pop writer traces his own development, from slightly clumsy Marxist projecting onto old-school rap, to the most acute theorist of pop-culture I know.

4/5

- **Totally Wired: Post-Punk Interviews** (2009) by Simon Reynolds. Less impressive collection, but his love of the music shines through, and his scepticism about the more wanky post-punks helps considerably. David Byrne and Green Gartside come across particularly well.

3/5

- Re-read: **Stumbling on Happiness** (2006) by Daniel Gilbert. This is really amazing, pop-psych survey of how to apply the last 50 years of psychology / cognitive science. He's one the pioneers of the Economics of Happiness school, but nowhere near as annoying as those tend to be. Also has a good Woody Allen-type flow.

5?/5

- Re-read: **How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read** (2008) by Pierre Bayard. Astonishing and therapeutic work against the reading classes (of which I obviously am, but still). Bayard actually disowns it, and there's plenty of obvious irony involved, but the "Bayard" of this is still a credible and persuasive devil's advocate.

5/5

- Re-read: **The Phantom Tollbooth** by Norton Juster. Favourite children's book. Sarcastic and warm and overflowing with ideas.

5/5

NOVEMBER 2012

- Read aloud, aborted: **Journey to the Centre of the Earth** (1871) by Jules Verne. Proper boring. First 150 pages (out of 220) is a completely uneventful dialogue about an obscure Victorian geological debate. Narrator is kind of charming. Didn't help that we were just waiting for the dinosaurs to appear. Gave up.

2/5

- ***Flight to Arras*** (1942) by Antoine Saint-Exupéry. Powerful nationalist elegy written during the defeat of France. I don't think I've ever been moved by anything that subsumes the individual so totally. The central thought is that war is futile and absurd *but that he must continue*. The existentialism can get kind of leaden in comparison to his other stuff.

4/5

- ***How to Travel With a Salmon*** (1994) by Umberto Eco. Bunch of satirical pieces about academia and consumerism. One piece, analysing a cheapo catalogue, is quite affecting. But it hasn't aged all that well. He's still funny. This has the feel of a notebook which is cool?

3/5.

- Read aloud, aborted: ***Critique of Criminal Reason*** (2006) by Michael Gregorio. Couldn't resist this after reading the blurb - Kant solving murder mysteries in wintry Konigsberg - but gave up after 80 pages of samey dirty Gothic blah. I really don't like crime fiction: by virtue of its conventions, it is rarely humanistic, fantastical, or realistic - the three ways fiction can impress me.

2/5.

DECEMBER 2012

- ***Escalator*** (2006) by Michael Gardiner. Incredible set of short stories by a Scot living in Japan. I rarely engage with the form, but each of these is too powerful to stay distant from. Racism, hyper-reality, economic pressure, family, handled with subtlety and quiet desperation.

4/5

- ***How to Live Forever Or Die Trying*** (2007) by Bryan Appleyard. A versatile thinker being critical about transhumanism and cryonics. His portrait of us as morbid/paranoid pill-munching nerds is not obviously incorrect. The book's a bit of a mishmash, with an extended middle section on ultimate meaning and

Medieval funeral habits not totally meshing together - and his grasp of the science is, as he admits, insufficient. But his summation is balanced, and *a priori* his estimate of the intractable philosophical problems and potential social catastrophes of these disruptive technologies is at least coherent.

4/5

- **Museum Without Walls** (2012) by Jonathan Meades. Another favourite, the best bellowing arts contrarian in the land. This is mostly just a collection of TV scripts I've already seen, and though this means that we can at last catch up with his rapid-fire aesthetic barbs, they still suffer without their inspired, bizarre visual production. A sense of loneliness comes through on paper, where anger and historical sweep is the dominant note in the final programmes. You can see almost all his work at this Youtube channel. It is a fine use of a week.

4/5, for 5/5 programmes.

- **No Other Place: Poetry from the Aberdeen University Review** (1995). Got this as a xmas present for someone - but I know they encourage pre-using media presents (why wouldn't you?) so I snuck in a read-through. Lots of poems about Aberdeen U specifically, which got me good and sentimental. The final piece, by Archibald Wavell, is fun:

...My chin, once glossy as a nectarine,
Now looks like holly on a Christmas card,
Or straggly hawthorns in a woodland scene
Such as is deftly drawn by Fragonard;
No R.S.M. would pass me for a guard
However much I titivate and preen.
My luck would daunt a Roland or Bayard;
I left my shaving-brush at Aberdeen.

Pity me, Prince : the water here is hard,
Hourly my tongue inclines to the obscene,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
I left my shaving-brush at Aberdeen.

3/5 in general tho.

JANUARY 2013

- **Cloud Atlas** (2004) by David Mitchell. Was impressed by this, but I also felt a little contempt. It has features befitting a great book: stunning detail, perfectly historicised prose, engaging characters, intricate narrative structure, embrace of multiple genres. It's too clean, somehow. Though it depicts us being preyed on by us at our worst; though its dystopic future is a plausible extrapolation from our current world-system, it's not as challenging as it thinks it is. Pop-Hegel, pyrotechnic Joyce.

On structure: there are ten sudden and non-linear narrative shifts, moving back and fore through four or five centuries in a world which almost matches our history up to 2000CE. These sections are connected by each having a reader (the opening sea journal being read by the Romantic composer, whose letters are obsessed over by the journalist, whose memoir is seen by the hack editor, whose tale is seen as an ancient film by the saintly clone, who is remembered as a god in the post-apocalypse story that is as far forward as we see. (They are also connected by a nice reincarnation overlay - but apart from giving brutal history more chances to be brutal to the same people and giving matters a hint of fatalism, I don't really get it.) The bit with the composer Frobisher is my favourite strand: he transcends his cheeky bohemian archetype and becomes horribly tragic despite his pig-headedness and camp pretension.

The book's last line, returning to the original C19th narrator, is a good summary of the book's wounded, pessimistic collectivism:

He who would do battle with the many-headed hydra of human nature must pay a world of pain & his family must pay it along with him! & only as you gasp your dying breath shall you understand, your life amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean! Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?

So: Enjoyable, ambitious, occasionally profound, unsatisfying.

4/5

- ***Still Life with Woodpecker*** (1980) by Tom Robbins. Funny, cynical comedy about the politically radical hippies. DeLillo on MDMA (if he had less of a problem with women). The narrator is loud (talking to his typewriter and the moon) in the manner of Douglas Adams but with subtler prose.

It worked. Mongooses did kill the rats. They also killed chickens, young pigs, birds, cats, dogs, and small children. There have been reports of mongooses attacked motorbikes, power lawn mowers, golf carts, and James Mitchener. Hawaii had traded its rat problem for a mongoose problem... Society had a crime problem. It hired cops to attack crime. Now society has a cop problem.

While it mocks New Age politics, Robbins still loves an outlaw and a weirdo, and so he takes on their anarchic personal project, to "preserve insanity" and all that. ("*A better world has gotta start somewhere. Why not with you and me?*") The book's conclusion is funny and irresponsible: roughly that, when faced with a conflict between social activism and romantic individualism (as we all always are), ditch the former. Man.

3/5.

- [A bunch of works of philosophy of essential indexicals.] Interesting stuff. It's an oddly light-hearted debate, I suppose because the wry John Perry got to set the tone. I'm now convinced that (some) indexicals are irreducible, and need to be included as a base ontological category, if you're into base ontological categorisation. So that makes for *three* types of things in fundamental reality: physical units, qualia, and (some) indexicals.

3/5.

- The **80,000 Hours** website. Graduates attempt to maximise the good one can do with a life (within the system). I don't endorse every part of their bright-eyed gradualist careerism - but it's broadly the correct way to live, so I joined up. (For something more substantive, try Will Crouch on the ethics of career choice.)

4/5.

- **Edge Magazine's Answers 2013.** A portrait of the worst things in the world by some of the cleverest people in it. Loads of people went for the cheap way out and said "We should worry about too much worrying", which is true. Quality varies: these are the most astonishing bits.

4.5/5.

- ***Is that a Fish In Your Ear?*** (2012) by David Bellos. Great strident stuff, wrestling against the prevailing pessimistic dogmas of English lit and ling. (e.g. "We can never fully understand each other as individuals or cultures." "Truth is just power.") This is a poppy treatment of his work, but he stills manages to pack in a lot of brilliant (original?) theory, a refutation of Sapir-Whorf in four pages, and lots of charming stats about the state of world language today. I imagine he's a great teacher - provocative, clear and original.

4.5/5

FEBRUARY 2013

- Read aloud: ***And Then There Were None*** (1939) by Agatha Christie. My first go with her. Didn't guess the baddie.

3/5

- ***The March of Unreason*** (2005) by Dick Taverne. Good and grumpy attack on the strange alliance of anti-vaxers, environmentalists, and anti-globalisers that attack science when it shows up their ideologies. Greenpeace's internal mechanics turn out to be quite Stalinist. Rorty is cited in this - as a man of unreason! -and Taverne's whole chapter on postmodernism misses the point profoundly, but still. Optimistic in the manner of successful scientists.

3/5.

- ***Thinking, Fast and Slow*** (2011) by Daniel Kahneman. Gentle collation of forty years' work on systematic errors of the human mind. Basically a quieter, less hostile version of *The Black Swan* (which was based in equal measure on Kahneman's research and Classical stoicism). I confess to being a bit obsessed with the Heuristics and Biases program. They are hard ideas to grasp, no matter how they are presented, and since the science he presents is solid - and vital for the prosecution of a halfway rational life - I'll be back.

5/5.

- ***Kluge*** (2009) by Gary Marcus. A rare beast: a funny and humane work of evolutionary psychology. Part of the cognitive bias project and so I am mad for it.

4/5

- [Loads of Critical theory, Queer theory, Race studies, two sociology dictionaries, a lot of Tumblrs, and a shower of political philosophy], for my piece on Liberationism.

2/5

- ***The Social Construction of What?*** (1999) by Ian Hacking. Wonderful. Balanced and humane analysis of the usually partisan matter of constructionism. I've been sympathetic to SC for years (anyone who looks closely at gender must be), but he is the first scientific constructionist to not irritate me. He gives an illuminating logical analysis of the different kinds and many muddled uses of the idea. He concludes that, in science at least, construction is a very real and consequential process, one that cannot be dismissed by appeal to the "Context of Justification". This is all the more plausible because (more so than Bruno Latour), he is clearly very well-informed about the science he discusses. He's fond of the science, even. The section where he tries to navigate the trade-off between realism's history of oppression, *and* relativism's potential for totalitarian abuse is really touching. (He concludes that he is of the wrong generation to get behind radical constructionisms!) Required reading for anyone who wants to use, or dismiss, the concept.

4.5/5. (First two chapters 5/5.)

MARCH 2013

- ***Unspeak*** (2006) by Steven Poole. Startling and witty linguistic analysis of modern politics' *framing*.

UNSPEAK - mode of speech that persuades by stealth, E.g., climate change, war on terror, ethnic cleansing, road map.

Poole is a model for political writing in his eloquent, empirical, reasoned rage. It is a product of the time - attacking New Labour and the Bush administration in particular - but its principles transfer to today. Enough to radicalise anyone. I've struck off "ethnic cleansing", "community" and "West Bank barrier" from my active vocabulary, so should you.

4.5/5

- Everything Zach Weiner has published online, including his reading lists (2005-13). He's just a really inspiring guy. A literature graduate, now studying physics, his webcomic Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal has an amazing wry grasp of basically every academic field. His jokes are sceptical and romantic, puerile and hyperintelligent. (Unlike most topics, there are not enough jokes about economists being bastards!) His science podcast with his wife is badly recorded but always worthwhile, his Youtube group is always funny and often transcendent, and even many of his blogged offcuts are charming- see in particular this one about the future of the library. /mancrush.

4/5

- ***How to be an Existentialist*** (2011) by Gary Cox. Chatty, trite, and presumptuous. ("Young people are stupid", "disabled people should stop moping" "political correctness is oppressing me".) It is at least trying to process the massive abstractions into an accessible intro, but ends up childish and uncritical. He's a tenured academic, too! Taken as systematic description of the real world, Existentialism is a fruitless neo-Kantian mess. Taken as extreme postwar poetry or stoic-fictionalist cognitive stance, it is beautiful and stark.

2/5.

- ***My Uncle Oswald*** (1979) by Roald Dahl. Comic novella about raping famous men for money. I got appalled at this here, but without denying it's a great read.

3/5. (1/5 if you're sensitive to deadpan horror.)

- ***Social Identity*** (2003) by Richard Jenkins. Was drawn in by the cute epigrams ("Everybody needs somebody"), but this is turgid. Sociology/anthropology mix, producing an airless, evidence-poor citation-circle-jerk. Reading around, I find this to be typical of the field.

1/5.

- **'The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth About Morality & What to Do About It'** (2010) by Joshua David Greene. The first PhD I've ever read: a witty and authoritative piece of meta-ethics. He surveys almost every large approach under the criteria of strong naturalism, and concludes that anti-realist utilitarianism is the least unsatisfying - which is handy, since I just read 377 A4 pages, and anything that long had damn well better confirm my prejudices.

4.5/5



New Zealandish propaganda about New Zealandish propaganda (1917)

*Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling.
It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling
- for as soon as the mind responds, connects with the thing,
the feeling shows in the words; this is how poetry enters deeply into us.
If the poet presents directly feelings which overwhelm ...
they cannot strengthen morality and refine culture, set heaven
and earth in motion and call up the spirits!*

– Wei Tai (C11th)

Was in a sciencey mood. (This makes my ravishing encounter with Rorty - the greatest of the irrealist literary crusaders - more notable still.) Science is most easily taken in via sweet funny geeks - so I returned to scifi for the first time in years. Poetry overtook me mid-May. Been active, but the increase in reading is really just redistribution, taken from my crash news diet and cutting down on my beloved web aggregators (3QuarksDaily, Wood S Lot, and Arts & Letters Daily). Some long gushes here; forgive.

APRIL 2013

- Read aloud: ***Trial of the Clone*** (2012) by Zach Weinersmith. Super-fun choose-your-own-adventure book. It's a satire of Star Wars and classic scifi, your character's greed and passive aggression matched only by his/her incompetence. Bellylaughed a lot, which is unusual for me. Sometimes the gags fall back on scat when it gets tired of mocking religion, but I mean that in the best possible way.

4/5. [Read twice, one and a half hours each]

- ***Mogworld*** (2010) by Ben "Yahtzee" Crowshaw. Similar to *Trial*, this is a pop-postmodern treatment of its genre's conventions, for fantasy: it's self-aware videogame NPCs living and suffering in an uninspired swords-n-sorcery MMO. The parts where the characters begin to realise that the gods are incompetent nerds are my favourite. It doesn't have the vitriol of his famed game reviews, but the ending is suitably brutal, and there is a sad tension throughout (the protagonist repeatedly and sincerely asks to be killed) which elevates things a bit.

3/5. [4 hours, lightly]

- ***Thinking About Texts*** (2001) by Richard Hopkins. Just an A-level English textbook, with good, long extracts and scrupulous presentation of alt perspectives. English students at my university were taught very little Theory indeed - and while this made discussions much less pompous, they were also kinda toothless. Without theory, the subject "English" has little to distinguish it, being as it is just an odd dilution of philosophy tied to narrow history of ideas with sprinklings of sexy concepts from newer humanities (e.g. Media studies, Race studies, Queer theory, Area studies). Anyway: tutorials would have been less unbearable if this book had been ubiquitous.

3/5 (4/5 for culture people.) [6 hours]

- ***Venus in Exile: the Rejection of Beauty in C20th Art*** (2002) by Wendy Steiner.
 Warm, masterful. Main thesis is that beauty and women were so intertwined a hundred years ago that Modernism, as rejection of old beauties, was essentially misogynistic - in form, as well as just in its practitioners. Furthermore, that this misogyny, as part of a wider smashing of old things, was key to feminism finally breaking out and establishing new options for women. Convincing.

4/5. [5 hours]

- ***Key Concepts: Gender*** (2006) by Tina Chanter. Annoying: conventionally unconventional, dogmatically anti-dogmatic. I've been looking for a good introduction to give to Questioning friends. This is not that. (Is it a coincidence that the best popularisers - Paglia, Greer, Moran - are all highly problematic feminists?) It manages to make the most exciting parts of current feminism - standpoint theory, Calhoun's post-deconstruction ideas - sound dull, dense and theoretically empty, as if it were the same kind of navel-gazing theorism as the hyperinflated Althusserian-Foucauldian stuff. (To be fair, *any* overview has to cover French theory, because that's what our counter-gender people have actually been up to *for decades*. But not necessarily with this much blind acceptance.)

You get the impression that the only progress in feminist thought is in calling your predecessors timid or bigoted - JS Mill calls out the Victorians, Okin calls out JS Mill, Butler calls out Okin, Wittig calls out Butler, and then Calhoun calls Wittig heteronormative(!). The book does give a breakdown of French feminism in slightly less abstruse language, and goes through all the Waves, including the intentionally confused interference-wave that is pomo-poco gender studies. And it's brief.

2/5. [3 hours]

- ***Turn Off Your Mind*** (2003) by Gary Lachmann. I'm a sucker for this book's thesis: that Charles Manson, Scientology, and Altamont were not horrible subversions of the 60s' ideology - but its logical conclusion. The book's a series of pop history lessons, and is in fact a bit too full of sections like: "...and then Ram Dass went to India and met Guru McFamous who also knew Bastard

McProfound who was notorious for writing a best-selling book of consciousness revolution and being racist for kicks". A fairly clear-eyed account of a bunch of fucking creeps who still have cultural capital.

3/5. [3 hours, very lightly]

- Audiobook: ***The History of Philosophy without Any Gaps*** (2011-3) by Peter Adamson. Ongoing series of free podcasts. It's mostly introductory, the standard readings plus the odd surprising debunking (e.g. "Heraclitus is not a philosopher of chaos"). Not a massive amount of women here, even given that he's going through the Medievals and Islamic Golden Age atm. (Hypatia? Arete? Heloise? Hildegard of Bingen?)

3/5. [30 hours with my ears]

- ***Conundrum*** (1974) by Jan Morris. "*I was three or perhaps four years old when I realised I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl. It is my earliest memory.*" Memoir by our first trans national treasure. (Even the *Daily Mail* said:

A compelling and moving read, a world away from the tabloid titillation that normally surrounds the subject.

!!) Her:

I see now that, like the silent prisoners I was really deprived of an identity... I realize that the chief cause of my disquiet was the fact that I had none. I was not to others what I was to myself. I did not conform to the dictionary's definition - 'itself, and not something else'.

While it's technically detailed - dealing with the nittygritty of eight years of medical tourism, voice training, colleague adjustment, and a compulsory divorce from her wife - it leaves lots about the subjective experience of *crossing* unanalysed. Which is both fine and disappointing.

4/5. [3 hours]

- **Map and Territory** (2010) by Eliezer Yudkowsky. Manifesto for LessWrong's radical empiricism, and a genuinely good intro to epistemology (and formal epistemology) to boot. Being a tricksy wishywashy philosophy student, I unfortunately can't follow them in stamping Bayesian-Quinean realism as The straightforward answer to everything (as he says, "the simple truth"), but I admire Yudkowsky's hard-headedness, technical creativity, and style a whole lot.

4*/5. (LessWrong is reliably between 3*/5 and 5/5.) [2 hours.]

- **Capitalist Realism** (2012) by Mark Fisher. Short book by one of Britain's premier net intellectuals, trying to demystify the Hegel/Baudrillard approach to society, existence, and pop culture. He is humane, focussing on why we might think we need these Theorists, and he does well to handle critical theory without the field's usual airless, salacious presumptiveness. But it's still logic chopping without the logic. YMMV.

3/5. [3 hours. (Short; not simple)]

- **The "Transcendental Analytic"** (1787) by Immanuel Kant. Difficult, flashy apodixis. His arguments are gappy; prose awful; goals anyway radically different from mine (he wanted certainty, exhaustiveness, the establishment of free will at any metaphysical cost: a.k.a. submission).

NB: The *Analytic* is only about 1/8th of his *Critique of Pure Reason*. I don't doubt that there's enough subtlety and complexity to spend a career reading him. I just doubt there's world enough and time for *me* to return for the rest.

2/5. [14 hours, including modern help.]

- **Anglo-English Attitudes** (2013) by Geoff Dyer. Stunning bunch of 3- or 4-page essays. Often on French or Italian figures or places (Althusser, Cartier-Bresson) or unusual objects of aesthetics (Action Man). What we call "research" is just incidental to Dyer - glittering coincidences and correlations fall into his lap as he sets about reading, apparently, everything.

4/5. [2 hours, skipping some of the French ones]

- Read aloud: ***Until Before After*** (2011) by Ciaran Carson. Solemnly blatant. Plainly good. 157 unpunctuated sentence-poems, each poem holding maybe three jarring, run-on thoughts. It's melancholy, about loss, time and rhythm, but present itself as neither pitiful nor gnostic. It's really difficult to parse, but you don't resent that. There's a shout-out to China Miéville in the back, which is mad! because these poems are stylistically nothing like Miéville's clotted, neologistic prose. There are maybe 2 words less than a hundred years old in the whole book ("credit card"). Closer inspection.

4/5. [Twice = 2 hours]

- ***Hijack Reality: Deptford X*** (2008) by Bob and Roberta Smith. Aggrandised history of a cute London art festival he helped found. I'm not much into zany *free play* atm. Art, as an institution, seems much more hollow and ritualistic than it recently did. Which leads me to wonder: am I on the CP-Snow-seesaw? Does my current enthusiasm for science mean I must gain some contempt for arts? (Art might be the proper home of structuralist waffle - being, as it sometimes is, a floating system of signs with no correspondence or weight.) Anyway, this gets an extra point for being starry-eyed and literally democratic - too rare in art today.

3/5. [< hour.]

- Read aloud: ***Aphorisms*** (1838) by Napoleon Bonaparte, compiled by Honore de Balzac. Not very good, mostly. He's obviously *truly* independent - e.g. there's lots of praise for Muhammad here, lots of fearless anticlerical scepticism, lots of examination of despots. He's not coherent at all - he's *both* an anti-intellectual "man of action" and a shiny-eyed Enlightenment rationalist; Machiavellian bastard *and* Aristotelian virtue-seeker; imperial elitist *and* populist revolutionary. Consider: Napoleon caused the deaths of between 3 and 7 million people (i.e. 0.5% of every person alive at the time), imposing significant effects on almost

the entire world - and he's a very average writer. Read him next to Nietzsche, who plausibly never harmed anyone in his entire life, but whose writing stills scorches and stuns us. (This gets better when we remember that Nietzsche considered Napoleon one of a handful of people who have been truly 'great'.) Charitable reading: We happen to have caught up with Napoleon's thoughts, but not with Nietzsche's.

Some good lines that don't depend on their speaker being extraordinary for impact:

You never climb that high unless you do not know where you are going.

Politics - which cannot be moral - is that which must make morality triumph.

Superstition is the legacy left by one century's clever people to the fools of the next...

2/5. [1 hour]

MAY 2013

- **The whole of the Open University course MST125.** I am a really bad student. I am just promising enough, just engaged enough for my laziness and bluffing to be actively shameful rather than a mere sad fact. (I expect glory regardless.) This course is obviously as abstract as can be, but the occasional human fact still breaks in - e.g. when the anonymous author(s) complain about the chilling effect Christianity had on the development of probabilistic reasoning. This is funny. I excuse my own lack of drive here.

2/5. [60 hours, including ratiocination.]

- Read aloud(!): ***Perdido Street Station*** (2000) by China Miéville. Enormous steampunk social commentary dressed in gorgeous nasty prose (think Nabokov on America). This is *ethical* science fiction. His dank, evil city, 'New Crobuzon',

is a dark mirror of Terry Pratchett's Ankh-Morpork (itself a funhouse mirror of Elizabethan London) without its animating sense of fun and justice. Instead, it has fearsome class consciousness; satires on academic, tabloid and political speech, misogyny, and the deeply tainted political economy of science/capital/government.

Its substance was known to me. The crawling infinity of colours, the chaos of textures...each one resonated under the step of the dancing mad god, vibrating and sending little echoes of bravery, or hunger, or architecture, or argument, or cabbage or murder or concrete across the aether. The weft of starlings' motivations connected to the thick, sticky strand of a young thief's laugh. The fibres stretched taut and glued themselves solidly to a third line, its silk made from the angles of seven flying buttresses to a cathedral roof.

What I take to be the central metaphor: one of the oppressed races are found to have a native power - the 'potential energy of crisis' - which, with a scientific harness, could revolutionise the world: i.e. Classical Marxism. Our heroes are not especially heroic. In the face of The City, no one has all that much power.

4*/5. [22 hours, because spoken]

- **The Marxists** (1962) by C Wright Mills. I take this to be a fair appraisal of the development of the great opposer. Book is mainly extracts from brilliant, now-obscure theorists and commentators (e.g. Kardelj, Luxembourg, GDH Cole). Mills is anti-Stalinist and anti-McCarthyist - i.e. he took what we now take to be the only virtuous path through the marsh of the day - which required considerable bravery and fairness (as the respective failures of Orwell and Sartre on the matter show). The chapter on "How Not to Criticise Marxism" is amazing, distinguishing types of Marxist that people still confuse these days. He died just before publishing this, thus missing the great wave of neo-idealism from Frankfurt, a wave that more determines the character of today's radical Left than the classical economics detailed herein. He wouldn't be one of them.

4/5. [5 hours, some skipping.]

- **The Rorty Reader** (2009) by Richard Rorty. Epochal, encompassing, uplifting. I've been in love with the *idea* of Rorty for years. (He is: the renegade

Analytic, the outrageous unifier, the literary soul, the pessimistic utopian, the great puncturer, and the bravest postmodernist by far - because he just comes out and says it, bites the bizarre bullets.) He is illuminating about philosophy of mind, poetry, foundationalism, the public/private divide, feminism, America, MacKinnon, Derrida, Davidson, and Dewey (obv), among lots of other things. One can usually taste meanness in postmodern writing - stemming, I suppose, from our sense of being hopelessly undermined by it - but never in Rorty. I found this really hard going - I've been reading it since January - despite his being utterly clear, original and sometimes funny.

5?/5. [Long. 40 hours?]

- **Surface Detail** (2010) by Iain 'M' Banks. Meditation on consequentialism and moral progress, only more fun than that sounds. ("Consequences are everything.") I'm a big fan of his Culture novels, but this is only good. Spends 300 pages setting up its thirteen protagonists into like seven plot threads. As a result, he has to repeat a lot of exposition to keep us - including, in one instance, a full page of quoted dialogue which we'd heard 50 pages back. Oddly simplistic despite its fifth-order intentionality, then. *Surface Detail* fills out some of the mechanisms and organisation of the Culture; throws his usual bucket of ideas at the plot (graphic descriptions of Hell, a first-person account of an aquatic, hair-thick species, an extended section in a Medieval convent) and keeps a good amount of tension and mental strain going. Good, full of simple dramatised philosophy.

4/5. [6 hours]

- **Matter** (2008) by I M Banks. This entry's mostly set on a C17th world, the rest given over to barely interesting galactic politics. The Culture novels feel free to wave away technological plot devices with talk of "energy grid!" or "nanotech!", but Banks shows off hard-scifi cred here, giving a few lovely, moving images based on meteorology and astrophysics. A scathing note on the current-affairs blogosphere:

A rapidly expanding but almost entirely vapid cloud of comment, analysis, speculation and exploitation...Welcome to the future, she

thought, surveying the wordage and tat. All our tragedies and triumphs, our lives and deaths, our shames and joys are just stuffing for your emptiness.

Ending is good and brutal, made me stop and infer for ten mins afterward. So, yeah, Banks has been playing the same "ooh, neo-colonialism", "ooh, consequences", "ooh, angst in utopia" note for a while. But it's a *good* note.

3/5 for a 4/5 series. [5 hours.]

- **Whereabouts: Notes on Being a Foreigner** (1987) by Alastair Reid. So beautiful: set of long essays punctuated with poems. He's a poet, Hispanicist, translator and long-time New Yorkerer. He was right there when the Latin American lit boom began, giving Neruda a home in London - mates with Marquez, insofar as anyone is. I like his prose even better than his excellent poems.

Foreigners are, if you like, curable romantics. The illusion they retain, perhaps left over from their mysterious childhood epiphanies, is that there might somewhere be a place – and a self – instantly recognizable, into which they will be able to sink with a single, timeless, contented sigh. In the curious region between that illusion and the faint terror of being utterly nowhere and anonymous, foreigners live.

I love him for his scepticism about identity - the piece on returning "home" to Scotland is great *because* of his distance from it. "Scotland":

*It was a day peculiar to this piece of the planet,
when larks rose on long thin strings of singing
and the air shifted with the shimmer of actual angels.
Greenness entered the body. The grasses
shivered with presences, and sunlight
stayed like a halo on hair and heather and hills.
Walking into town, I saw, in a radiant raincoat,
the woman from the fish-shop. ‘What a day it is!
cried I, like a sunstruck madman.
And what did she have to say for it?
Her brow grew bleak, her ancestors raged in their graves
as she spoke with their ancient misery:
'We'll pay for it, we'll pay for it, we'll pay for it!*

5?/5. [3 hours]

- **Desperate Characters** (1970) by Paula Fox. Amazing, portentous realism. Wife: "Oh, never mind what I say." Husband: "I don't and I can't." Fox draws intense, evil significance out of ordinary irritations (a cat bite, a smashed window, a feud at work) - as we do when at our lowest. It's dark without being Gothic; apocalyptic without melodrama; heartbroken without self-pity. On a hospital waiting room:

It was a dead hole, smelling of synthetic leather and disinfectant, both of which odors seemed to emanate from the torn scratched material of the seats that lined the three walls. It smelled of the tobacco ashes which had flooded the two standing metal ashtrays. On the chromium lip of one, a cigar butt gleamed wetly like a chewed piece of beef. There was the smell of peanut shells and of the waxy candy wrappers that littered the floor, the smell of old newspapers, dry, inky, smothering and faintly like a urinal, the smell of sweat from armpits and groins and backs and faces, pouring out and drying up in the lifeless air, the smell of clothes... a bouquet of animal being, flowing out, drying up, but leaving a peculiar and ineradicable odor of despair in the room as though chemistry was transformed into spirit, an ascension of a kind...

The quiet, careful way that *every* character is sketched in their paranoia is convincing, and unnerving. Sure, it's about upper-middle class people's pain, but that's still pain. The least tractable kind, in fact.

4/5. [4 hours]

- **Stuff White People Like eBook** (2010) by Christian Lander. Didn't really get the point of this. It mocks a certain small, ridiculous group - C21st upper-middle-class lefty American hipsters -and sets them up as the whitest people in the world. I'm in the same boat as the author - white guy liking "white" things (*The Wire*, green tea, public transport, Europe) and worrying that this marks my participation in class trends that exclude people. I also share his contempt of people with contempt for practicality. So this is, I suppose, a handy guide to the fads of a certain group of middlebrows in our particular cultural moment. Insofar as it encourages actual class consciousness among alt.consumerist hipsters: hooray. Insofar as it sneers at trends that actually could change the world if adopted en masse (e.g. vegism, bikes, actual diversity, engaging with foreign art), boo.

2/5. [1 hour.]

- **An Embarrassing Book Title** (2010) by Tim Ferriss. Hodgepodge of extreme, supposedly scientific Pareto "lifehacks" for: rapid weight-loss, lazy bodybuilding, polyphasic sleep blah, regeneration from chronic injury, DIY female orgasm therapy. (One of the worst tropes in reading culture is the stupid presumption that *to read something is to approve of its contents*. So, I feel bound to mention that I'm not interested in the stats-obsessed quasi-pro-ana muscle busywork this book centres around; I don't like his Silicon Valley technicism either; his conspicuous consumption of medical attention is risible ("Just \$3800 four times a year for this battery of vanity tests!"); as is his desperate name-dropping self-promotion.) Came across it in the course of my new favourite hobby: grazing on other peoples' Kindles. Ferriss has a ... creative grasp of biochemistry, and his brute lack of self-doubt lets him be productively provocative (e.g. "I do not accept the Lipid Hypothesis of cardiac disease"; "DO NOT EAT FRUIT"). He quotes heavily from more expert people, and he does *do* everything he advocates. The main advantage of him is that he is fearless about ridicule, actually following what he sees as the evidence. Thus there's a long section on the bodybuilding potential of vegetarian diets - which got him lots of scorn from the meathead-o-sphere - as well as an idiosyncratic list of the substrates that vegists are often missing. (Boron, anyone?)

Alongside the unreflective drive to thinness, his most telling concern is his fixation on testosterone and morbid fear of infertility. So I scoffed at his fear of phones irradiating his testicles - but there actually is reason to think so. Less annoying than your average loud guru pseud.

3/5. (1 hour, lots of skipping - which he actually explicitly recommends.)

- **Blood Meridian** (1985) by Cormac McCarthy. Say it is 1985 A.P. (After Peckinpah). How can anyone write anything new about poor white psychopaths in the hot rural places of Victorian America?

The answer turns out simple: just have prose so tight and freshening - a jet hose comprising one-third Bible, one-third Emerson, one-third Ballard - that you again uncover the elemental bones of the Western. Also savagely de-emphasise your characters. Place them in enormous, indifferent vistas; give us no inner monologue - nor even indirect report of subjective life; have no speech marks to set their words apart from the landscapes (do not draw the eye to their presumed

humanity); have no apostrophes, no hyphens even, lest we remember; have as few names as possible, leave them as types - "kid" or "captain" or "mexican" or "brave"; set their incredible violence among such vast places it looks like little; have few capital letters but for God's. Lock your readers out; make everyone and everything opaque. (As he says himself:

*In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were
bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone
nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence.*

These cowboys and injuns punctuate the beautiful land of Central America with hanged babies; rings of decapitate heads; a four-eyed dog; a man calmly eating his own shit; endless thirsty hallucinogenic despair. This is exhausting, quite hard to read:

*All night the wind blew and the fine dust set their teeth on edge. Sand in
everything, grit in all they ate. In the morning a urinecolored sun rose
blearily through panes of dust on a dim world and without feature. The
animals were failing... That night they rode through a region electric and
wild where strange shapes of soft blue fire ran over the metal of the horses'
trappings and the wagonwheels rolled in hoops of fire and little shapes of
pale blue light came to perch in the ears of the horses and in the beards of
the men... the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid
like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone
but fear.*

(As well as this Nabokovian trudge through the middle section, McCarthy sometimes steers close to the comical with sentences like "*Itinerant degenerates bleeding west like a heliotropic plague.*") A typical human interaction in this book is "The kid looked at the man"; no more. There's plenty of grandeur - just not in humans. At the centre of the book stands the Judge - Satan, Ahab and Moby Dick all in one. ("His skin is so pale as to have almost no pigment.") Racism, fear and poverty form the baseline. The Comanches, for instance, are here worse than demons

*...grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns... riding
down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the
brimstone land of Christian reckoning...*

- "at least demons are Christian"!

Lots of descriptions of the stars, inbetween brutalities

*The night sky lies so sprent with stars that there is scarcely a space of
black at all and they fall all night in bitter arcs and it is so that their*

numbers are no less...The stars burned with a lidless fixity and they drew nearer in the night until toward dawn he was stumbling among the whinstones of the uttermost ridge to heaven.

For the first time I understand why Aristotle's physics divides the world into different celestial and terranean operations: from down here back then, the stars look so clean and permanent, they're just not of our world, dirty, unhinged, and endangered as it has been, for almost everyone.

4*/5, but I understand if it's 2/5 for you. (11 long hours)

JUNE 2013

- **Open City** (2010) by Teju Cole. Careful, slow-burning diary-novel. We follow Julius, an upper-middle New Yorker doctor who lives, largely, in the absence of overt reference to his race (half-Nigerian, half-German). For existential reasons, *he walks and observes.* ("*The creak-creak of the swings was a signal, I thought, there to remind the children that they were having fun; if there were no creak, they would be confused.*") Cole mixes in plenty of banality, setting up the tension to come, in which the brooded past breaks in, and freedom (in its American, European and larger, shadowy senses) is weighed up and found to be a very mixed bag. The most interesting & flawed character is the Moroccan critical theorist Farouq - a hypereducated livewire working in an internet cafe. Who probably got to me because I flatter myself to be like him... if I had racism and massive chips on both shoulders to deal with.

4/5. (4 hours.)

- Read aloud: **Stranger Music** (1993) by Leonard Cohen. I don't think he's depressing! Does that make me in some way broken? Anyway: Cohen the Jewish Buddhist leverages literary power from a faith he does not own: his poems are thus as erotic and grotesque as the best Christian writing. Much funnier and more concrete than his songs, too. Sure, *everything is ominous* in his work, but it's also banal, and these often admit they're ridiculous. To my surprise he is never obscure; to my relief he is never fatally wounded by the vicious retribution his many flaws invite. His is a gnarled urban spirituality.

A strong, unlikely comparison: Bukowski. They both fixate on: plain poems

about poems, bitter desire, nakedness, grandiose self-loathing, losers in love, and the significance of everyday things. (Look at this: "The art of longing's over and it's never coming back.") Speaking of Bukowski: is Cohen sexist? Arguable. For every slap in the face like 'Diamonds in the Mine', there are several tendernesses ('Portrait of a Lady') and self-aware apologies for lust. I would say: shocking and honest about patriarchal shapes, generally not unfeminist. ("*You took my fingerprints away / So I would love you for your mind.*") Moments of chastity in amongst the randy fury - for instance he never says 'God', always 'G-d'. Lots about the Holocaust too, mostly its banal consequences.

*Kiss me with your teeth
All things can be done.
whisper museum ovens of
a war that Freedom won.*

The newer stuff is generally weak, because less wry, profane and specific.

(**4/5** with lots of 5/5 moments: 'French and English', 'Israel', 'A Working Man', 'Queen Victoria and Me', 'Montreal' 'Hydra 1960', 'A Cross Didn't Fall on Me', 'Disguises', 'It's Probably Spring'.)

- **Altered Carbon** (2002) by Richard Morgan. Class act: cyberpunk without cheap gothic neon and lolspeak; noir without cartoonish conventions. A meditation on identity and consent via sex and violence. Genuinely.

The Scene: Consciousness can be up- and downloaded. In this world, if you are rich enough, *you do not die*. If you're richer than that, you can be uploaded into a young clone of yourself - otherwise you take whatever marginalised corpse is going and adjust your sense of self to fit. Advertising can be beamed obtrusively into your mind. The UN has become a Shady Galactic Empire. He picks out implications from this tech brilliantly (e.g. what happens to celebrity culture?). The inevitable neologisms are excellent, intensely suggestive of the new culture's inner life: death is just "storage"; bodies are just "sleeves" and to be reincarnated is to be "sleeved"; a plasma gun is a "sunjet". Murder is just "organic damage". Catholics are (once again) the world's underclass - unable to travel interstellar because it involves casual storage (suicide) and resleeping (heresy), and killed with near-impunity because they alone cannot *testify at their own murder trials*.

Cartoonish moments: our anti-hero Takeshi Kovacs is attacked or apprehended 7 times in the first 150 pages.) People transition gender with regularity. Morgan makes a bold essentialist statement, which is somewhat backed-up:

To be a woman was a sensory experience beyond the male... To a man, skin was a barrier. To a woman it was an organ of contact. That had its disadvantages.

(Kovacs is tortured, horrifically, as a woman.) It is strongly implied - not least by our trained-psychopath protagonist - that this transhuman society is more psychopathic, owing to the lower stakes of violence, injury, and taboo-breaking. Gritty but not just gratuitous. Better than Gibson.

4/5, at least. (9 hours.)

- Read aloud: *Poems of the Late T'ang* (8th & 9th Century), translated by Angus Charles Thomas (1965). I've been playing at knowing China for years, but of course I do not. (For instance, I picked this calm, modest book up unwittingly, and learn it is the gold standard translation by the greatest Western sinologist of the day.) It's a great hook: supposedly, Chinese poetry (world poetry?) peaked in the Ninth Century. For almost their whole history, passion and violence were considered inappropriate topics for poetry! They resented melodrama and fantasy in their poets! I must be jaded to think this is great. The poets seem all to be old men trying not to care about death - "snail shell men", in Ancient Chinese. They are mainly ultra-concrete - lots of masterpieces about mountains and rice and fish. Graham is a droll, masterful guide, making the requisite comparisons to Baudelaire and Pound for me, the clunking reader. (I can only assume the strange meters he uses are good approximations to the original.) The war between Confucianism and Buddhism is prominent here, and is hard for me to imagine -probably because I have a Hollywood understanding of these two "serene" "coping" philosophies. Li Shangyin's (李商隱的) "Written on a Monastery Wall":

*They rejected life to seek the way. Their footprints are before us.
They offered up their brains, ripped up their bodies: so firm was their resolution.*

*See it as large, and a millet grain cheats us of the universe:
See it as small, and the world can hide in a pinpoint.
The oyster before its womb fills thinks of the new cassia:
The amber, when it first sets, remembers a former pine.*

*If we trust the true and sure words written on Indian leaves
We hear all past and future in one stroke of the temple bell.*

Like a typical Westerner, I like the weirdoes: Li He (李賀), who's their wild fantasist (Blake?) and Meng Jiao (孟郊), barren kin of Poe. I enjoyed this, but don't really have the tools to judge:

TBC / 5. (3 hours)

- Read aloud: ***De Rerum Natura / The Nature of Things*** (-0060) by Lucretius, translated by Alice Stallings. An epic, declarative philosophy of peace and pre-scientific science. Lucretius poses a serious problem for a neat theory of poetry I like (from IA Richards): the claim that poetry's meaning and significance is almost independent of its truth-value; that poetic language is thus the opposite of scientific language, in which truth-value is the first and critical quantity. *De Rerum* messes with this because it explicitly sets out to lecture us on the ultimate reality of all things in verse. (Maybe I can say that "from the European Renaissance onwards" poetry becomes the land of the irrelevant fact.) Anyway: long, full of skippable stuff about a random rich guy (Memmius), but also a catchy guide to Epicurus, the most modern and loveable Attic Greek. (He was secular, undramatic, naturalist, tolerant, good-humoured...)

*And yet it is hard to believe that anything
in nature could stand revealed as solid matter.
The lightning of heaven goes through the walls of houses,
like shouts and speech; iron glows white in fire;
red-hot rocks are shattered by savage steam;
hard gold is softened and melted down by heat;
chilly brass, defeated by heat, turns liquid;
heat seeps through silver, so does piercing cold;
by custom raising the cup, we feel them both
as water is poured in, drop by drop, above*

Also worth reading for the ironies of Epicurus' lucky guesses and near-misses - e.g. ghosts aren't real: there are just images of mental atoms, and so on.

4/5. (3 hours.)

- ***Wild Harbour*** (1936) by Ian Macpherson. Post-apocalyptic Morayshire folk do Cold War survivalism before the Cold War? I was of course primed to love this,

but it's a lead ball of a book, drab and flattened. This probably makes it a brilliant picture of the era's background of vast fear, but that doesn't make for a good read. The three characters are just scared, and though their hardships are harsh indeed, they're oddly unaffected. The political economy that drove them out there is completely absent, only represented by sketches of bland armed thugs. Nor is the world-justifying love of the central couple convincing, either.

So it's tragic, but in no meaningful or honourable way. The prose does sometimes have a lovely Doric lilt - "*We were but young in stealth. As we drove along the Spey, the silent night was full of ears that harkened to our passing. It was midnight when our second journey ended, and dark, dark, dark.*" - and local loons will get a kick out of it.

2/5. (2 hours)

- Read aloud: ***Of Mutability*** (2010) by Jo Shapcott. Wasn't this *massive*, as contemporary poetry goes? ('What do you mean it's on display in the *front* of the shop?') Of water, London, transformation, plainness. It's a moderate book. Moderately sad, moderately whimsical, moderately vulgar ("Piss Flower"), moderately modern, moderately transcendental. Good. Am I supposed to say this makes it immoderately British?

3/5. (1 hour)

- Read aloud: ***Women's Poetry of the 1930s*** (1996), edited by Jane Dowson. Raising up unjustly obscure things is one of the main points of having academics around. However, half the poets in this actually refused to be segregated in their lifetime (that is, refused to be anthologised as women, or at all). Dowson is candid about this, and half the book is just suggestive little biographies as a result. Though she is shackled to the humanities' chaste, hyper-qualified prose

I have tried to illustrate that through their interrogations of national and international affairs, their preoccupations with cultural politics and their experiments with language and form... rejects the language of centrality and dominance...

and their fear of judgment / love of equivocation

If consensus over a 'good poem' is neither desirable nor possible, then value is largely determined by context...

it's not exactly hateful. Whether through Dowson's bias or the necessities of the time, these poets are even more independent than their male counterparts. Of those selected, Stevie Smith and Edith Sitwell are already fully reclaimed as the canonical boss ladies they are. Two big oversights of mine: Naomi Mitchison and Sylvia Townshend Warner. Mitchison is amazing - wise when wounded, droll and passionate, politicised but never journalistic: check out "To Some Young Communists", "Woman Alone", "Old Love and New Love". Warner is both blunt and metaphysical. (Others are just passable. Vita Sackville-West's are surprisingly poor, in fact. Highlights: "Beauty the Lover's Gift?" (bitter objectification); "Pastoral" (Manly Hopkins after empire). "A Woman Knitting" (the infinite in the finite); "Song of the Virtuous Female Spider" (satirising pious motherhood clichés); "The Sick Assailant" (rare for the time: male violence focus); "On August the Thirteenth" (on abruptness, gentle impotence of human pretensions).

4/5. (5 hours)

- Read aloud: ***Red Ice*** (1987) by Colin Mackay. Bitter, accusatory collection from a self-described "European pessimist" (i.e. Diogenes, Hobbes, Arnold, Spengler, Schopenhauer). Politically betrayed, he goes in for nihilism.

*We were hungry for belief
hope fed us human flesh.*

Aside: Mackay had a bloody tragic life, suffered without even any thrilling hubris or heroic end. Of course, many, many Canon artists had unusually hard lives and/or mood disorders. But it's not necessarily that *sad people write better* in general. Instead, readers - we cheap egoists - are just not receptive to others: we need to be woken up to a book, whether that's by recommendation, or biographical detail, or some other gimmick. A tragic biography is the most reliable primer. (Witness the death bump.) I would love Mackay's poems to be incredible; I've never been as primed as I was by reading Mackay's published suicide diary.

But they're just ok. Of moons, angels, deserts, atomisation, Hendrix. *Red Ice* was written well before Bosnia (the crowning, horror of his life), but it's already overflowing with dense ruined empathy and snarly emptiness and

survivor's guilt.

Are there great paintings in only black and grey? Well, yes, sort of. Calvary features four times in twenty poems. (*"the mountains are mere hills / the calvarys are daily and inconspicuous / and we are retreating into closed worlds"*) Mackay was playing at genocide logic, forty years after Adorno and twenty-five after Geoffrey Hill. (Does it matter, being *late* to the worst thing ever? No, but do it right, do it new.) The brute fact of the C20th drives him to nostalgia and lairy isolation

[I said] *I will be me for the hell of it*
[he said] *you working-class tory*
you aren't worth a shit.

So the poems are chaste and flat, romanticism with the innocent wonder ripped out; unleavened except for his spurious racial memory of everything being ok, once. (Wordsworth at Katyn.) (I do not think highly of Wordsworth.)

The long title poem has automatic force, being as it is about the gulags and the shame of Stalin apologetism (and same of Lenin, tbf). But it's also uncompressed, clumsy with rage (*"stop these follies of the human race!"*). It contains a direct condemnation of MacDiarmid, which is rare and titillating. On the like of his and Sartre's hypocritical silence on Stalinism:

[They said to]
"Find something in your own hemisphere!"
to salve my Commie conscience with,
to express solidarity with.
(If only there was someone I could
express solidarity with...)

There is one poem that gets somewhere: "Phantoms", a fast, vocal, twisted/triumphant repudiation of war and hippies alike. And "Holy, Wholly My Own" is admirable Golden Age crap. Faint praise: 'Nightwatchman of the lonely ex-socialist Scot's soul'.

Anyway: for loads of reasons it's not nice to attack the *hegemony of the sad* in art. 1) They are still good, when they're good; 2) they are often Witnesses, speakers-against-power, and anyone can be crushed and saddened by having to do that; 3) leave them some bloody consolation!

2/5. (2 hours)



(c) Denis Frémont "Rue des Boutiques Obscure"

Dead confused in September: read three people with absolutely different politics, one after another. First, Clive James, who in latter years is the consummate droll liberal railing against both wings of partisans: he's against celebrity culture, Ostalgie, and anti-American critical-theoretical cuteness, but also 'clash of civilisation' nonsense, socially destructive austerity and conservatism in the arts.

Next, James Kelman. Kelman's what I call a *liberationist*, a beautiful and extreme sociologised Leftist focussing on society's failures, exclusions and legal crimes, who demands much of themselves and everyone else (but who does so via a terrible error: reducing the world whole to politics).

Lastly, John Gray, the really disturbing wildcard. Technically a (radical) conservative, Gray actually agrees with no-one. He is anti-Communist in the highest degree, but anti-torture, anti-war, anti-Thatcherism, anti-Hayek too(!) His dreadful challenge – backed by considerable historical understanding and true scepticism – is that we, humans, have problems that will not go away, and that attempts to make them will only make matters worse. Is this true? (Isn't this exactly the attitude a dominant system trying to perpetuate itself would spread?) But that's circumstantial, ignoring how well-supported Gray's pessimism is (...)

Kelman and Gray agree that old-style liberalism (universalism plus rationalism equals justice) is made untenable by multicultural life – so Kelman bites one bullet, shedding universalism; Gray bites another, shedding rationalism (and therefore progress). James bites neither, and seems to get on alright

JULY 2013

- ***Building Stories*** (2012) by Chris Ware. Enormous, 3kg, 150-piece jigsaw-comic about ordinary desperation at varying physical scales (from anthropomorphised insect up to anthropomorphised house). I actually resented the format at first - it's a unwieldy doorstop that cannot be read outside - but by the end is a pleasing experiment: that Ware has succeeded in making the order of reading more or less irrelevant is of course incredible.

4/5.

- ***Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*** (1989) by Liz Lochhead. Never read her before. Not sure how she slipped me by, given the absolute consensus in about her, as Greatest Living Literary Yay. It's hard to picture in my head – there's lots of disjointed speech and speaking to camera – but no doubt it was important to take Mary off the shortbread tin and into her real, human sense of betrayal.

3/5.

- ***Learning to Live: A User's Manual*** (2010) by Luc Ferry. Awful title, awful cover, but interesting from start to finish. Fleeting pop tour of the development of philosophy (particularly the Continent), with an emphasis on those moderns who do eudaemonic life-work. Ferry is a compleat product of 's elite École culture – Sorbonne, philosophy prof, did his time in Office - but his insistence on clarity, even when talking about the likes of Bourdieu and Gadamer, and his rejection of their anti-humanism is somehow free of elitism. Another instance of the biggest trope in pop philosophy: 'reclaiming philosophy from the analysts'. Makes Nietzsche out as more unavoidable than he is?

3/5.

- Reread: ***Master of Reality*** (2008) by John Darnielle. Totally crushing, beautiful portrait of teenage alienation, institutionalisation, and Black Sabbath, from a man uniquely placed to deal with these things (as an ex-psychiatric-nurse metal

fan, also 's greatest lyricist of neurosis, delusion, and the car running on vapours but still running). That's heavy.

4/5.

- ***Unstated: writers on Scottish Independence*** (2012), edited by Scott Hames. Bunch of generally radical Scots thinking things through. It's good, occasionally surprising. The entry by Asher is a *perfect* example of the horrible clotted prose of the humanities today, form as wall obscuring content, assuming there actually is content behind it. In summary:

- John Aberdein: The SNP suck. We already control plenty and little changed. Still we must go independent to have any hope of foiling capitalism. Take the fisheries and mines, and take out tax evaders.
- Armstrong: SNP are crypto-unionists. Diluters! (They're keeping , the Queen, NATO, same bankers, low tax.) Need "Internationalism from below".
- Alan Bissett: We are atomised because of Thatcher. Class never went away. Despite the jokes, do not underestimate what *Braveheart* and *Trainspotting* did for us. May 2011 majority is The Moment. 's Yes will inspire change elsewhere.
- Jo Calder: , for proper arts funding(!)
- Margi: is a woman.
- Suhayl Saadi: Wooo! Waa! Hypercognitivist hoots mon!
...

4/5.

- ***Shakespeare*** (1990) by Germaine Greer. Was expecting this to be theory-laden and partisan, but the keynote of its 80 pages is just love, context and facts, deflating the man-myth while insisting on the incredibly modern philosophy to be found in him.

3/5.

help blah books do. (It doesn't help that the sequel is a dialogue with the Dalai Lama - who, though an incredible, important world figure, isn't exactly an authority on contemporary cognitive science.) The core claim seems important: "IQ, abstract fluid intelligence, is separable from EQ, the rapid and humane understanding of social situations, emotional networks, and intentionality." I want to believe, but this isn't enough.

3/5.

- A *Chinese Anthology* (1984) edited by Raymond van Over. Bunch of parables and fairytales taken from three millenia. Fun, and Other to me. Van Over has a thing for Pu Songling, the vernacular master of the form shunned by the mandarin system because of his colloquial and ornamental style. I'm not sure I learned much, but it beats Aesop.

3/5

- *Malignant Sadness: The Anatomy of Depression* (2000) by Lewis Wolpert. I am disposed to dislike Wolpert - he's anti-philosophy in the most tired scientistic way - but this is clear, historical, philosophical stuff, and since he suffers from a filthy case himself he can wield authority properly for once. The chapters on the cultural variation in the expression of the illness (e.g. as a result of even more intense disdain for mental illness, Asians tend to report its symptoms as physical ailments rather than mental malaise) is startling to hear coming from such a conservative scientist, and all the more persuasive as a result. Learnt a very good word, too: "somatisation".

3/5.

AUGUST 2013

- *Nothing to Envy: Real Tales from North Korea* (2010) by Barbara Demick. Horrible portrait of a deluded, brutalised and shadowed country. You've probably already imagined the emotional sway of the political religion, the

incompetence and manipulation of the cadre: here are some of the only first-person accounts. The dozen defectors she interviews agree on enough. She repeats entire sentences verbatim at various parts of the book, and runs out of ways to reflect somberly on collective madness and individual caprice (fair enough). It's hard to see a country in which 10% of the population die of state-caused starvation ever rising up.

4/5.

- **Waltz with Bashir** (2009) by Ari Folman and David Polonsky. Comic of the crushing film about the Lebanon war. This stark honesty is maybe not what we associate with , but of course it suits the lobbyists for us to forget the large part of the population that are two-state anti-settlers.

4/5.

- **Witch Wood** (1927) by John Buchan. Wonderful, subtle, ornate picture of the Scots Borders during the Reformation. Mystery novel without a detective. Went into this with unfair scepticism - he was such an imperial gank - but was dead impressed by his making boring theological debates portentious, and his unsentimental nature prose. I also learned lots of words.

4/5.

- **The Blade Itself** (2006) by Joe Abercrombie. Perceptive, subversive high fantasy. Prose is a delight, lucid and free-flowing - the opposite delight to China Mieville's prose. There's a sarcastic wizard, a torturer for a protagonist, a corrupt feudal society. 'The blade itself' is from Homer - a rare moment where that fucker recriminates about war. The details are the most convincing - the torturer's inner monologue is always asking questions, casting doubt - the amputee wagging his stump thoughtfully, scared people forgetting where their sword is (when it's in their hand). Addictive.

4/5

- ***Before They Are Hanged*** (2007) by Joe A. Yes, that addictive. So yeah it's about a big siege, a big battle and a big quest, but somehow new and uncliched. The heroes, of the quest: "What are we doing here?"; "Got nowhere better to be".

3/5.

- ***A World Without Time: Einstein and Gödel*** (2004) by Palle Yourgrau. Popularisation of his scholarly expose of Gödel's mathematical argument which seems to prove time's nonexistence as a direct consequence of General Relativity. Yourgrau argues this case using the overlooked friendship between E & G to stir up human interest. He beats the drum a bit hard, taking popularisation to mean more superlatives and jibes ("A German Jew among WASPS"). I get the feeling that Einstein's in the title more to boost sales / Gödel's profile than because the men's relationship is all that critical to the proof Yourgrau thinks has been hushed up or ignored.

3/5

- ***The Gigantic Beard That Was Evil*** (2011) by Stephen Collins. "Beneath the skin of everything is something nobody can know. The job of the skin is to keep it all in and never let anything show." Beautiful, pellucid, interpretable graphic novel about social angst. Baldest and most passive drone Dave suffers catastrophic facial hair - the first outbreak of disorder in a neurotically ordered island society (ours). The sea surrounding them is the Other (and the construction of 'evil'). Collins' text is almost blank verse, and the drawings are clean, with just enough detail to make each panel pop. (Dave hangs his wig on the hatstand every evening). In the middle of a boring meeting - suddenly chaos and apartheid. It's honestly not stretching matters to see the thing as a treatment of the Deleuzian idea of the Event. I cried at the climax of part 3, but it's part 4 that makes it exceptional: after Dave's gone, his society papers over and commoditises the event that threatened to destroy them.

5?/5.

- ***Ecce Homo*** (1908) by Nietzsche. Despite studying him off and on for two years, I still don't have much of a handle on Nietzsche. I do have a predictably humanist reading which I hope is true enough – “N as the grandest troll in history, as a necessarily scathing surgeon”. But I can't ignore his brutality, his never showing his working, and his less funny self-regard. The chapter titles of this, his autobiography, speak to both possibilities.

4/5.

SEPTEMBER 2013

- ***Appeal to Reason: 25 Years of In these Times*** (2002) by Various. Anthology of news from an American newspaper written largely by Left historians. I expected to disagree with much of the contents, but the selected pieces - uber-brief and factual - instead offer a shocking and low-ideology portrait of the news unreported or begrudgingly reported by mainstream sources. It's way left of *the Guardian* and still undeluded. I'd never looked into the Contras scandal which *In these Times* scooped – if you don't know, this was that time Reagan-funded murderers imported massive amounts of crack into the using government money. For real. Even the Zizek piece is low-key, wise, and borne out by history!

4/5.

- ***The Meaning of Recognition*** (2005) by Clive James. Stunning cultural and political essays, often really funny to boot (his series on the 2005 general election is acid and insightful). I needed to read someone who doesn't believe that everything personal is political tbh. (Larkin is a great poet and was a terrible man – why is this so difficult for people to accept? Is it just the halo effect?) His long essay on Isaiah is fantastic and contentious, and his retorts to the professional philosophers who come at him about it devastating, inspiring. Everything I learn about this man increases my affection.

4*/5.

- **Some Recent Attacks on the Public** (1992) by James Kelman. Righteous, detailed, paranoid liberationism, mostly about and race. Published by the redoubtable AK Press – *the* anarcho channel into the pre-internet teen bedrooms of .4Life.

3/5.

- **Gray's Anatomy** (2009) by John Gray. Hard to read - not for his prose, which is luminous and droll, but because he disagrees with almost everything almost everyone holds dear (whether reason, science, or organised social movements are your tool for improving the world). These essays span his career, satirising Marxists and Neocons, eulogising Santayana and explaining why communism sucks and doesn't work, and why liberalism is cute but doesn't work. (I paraphrase somewhat.) This leaves only Stoicism and resistance to dangerous meddlers as the 'good' life. Lucid, unclassifiable, horrific.

4*/5

- *Read aloud: The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) by John Buchan. Totally straightforward book: it is constructed of plot plus the geography of the Borders. Even so, it's just about full enough of archaic words to be diverting. Totally irresponsible book: it made of Germans omnimalevolent villains in 1915, blaming them *tout court* for the war, and suppressing ambiguity. Buchan was an unusually humane imperialist, and couldn't know we'd do this properly at soon after, but still, a dick move.

2/5.

- *Read aloud: Steppenwolf* (1927) by Herman Hesse. Aging Romantic pessimist Harry comes to a crisis, and learns that fun is fun (and meaningful). I've been avoiding this book because of its status in rockist, hedonist circles, but after the first 50 pages it begins to subvert this reputation, and itself, over and over again until charming. also inserts himself, as the domineering, sparkling 'Hermine'

which is mad and excellent. Would've changed my life if I'd read it aged 16, or in 1930. As it is, Regina Spektor, the Supremes and DJ Hixxy had already forced me to admit the existence and glory of non-cognitive, non-consequential, non-political pop sides to life.

4/5.

- Read aloud: ***The Man Who Went Up in Smoke*** (1966) by Maj Sjowall and Per Wahloo, translated by Joan Tate. Acclaimed yet awful pioneers of Scandinoir. I couldn't stand the prose – uniformly banal, full of aimlessly detailed descriptions of rooms never returned to, and, the weirdest thing, they're in the habit of repeating the protagonist Martin Beck's full name, eight times a page, which reminds me of nothing but preschool stories. Gets an extra point because this translation might just be terrible.

2/5.

- ***The Logic of Life*** (2008) by Tim Harford. Celebration of the entrenched imperialism of economics (the application of the field's hard-nosed acquisitory rational choice theory to more and more human phenomena - crime, romance, addiction, corporate pay, and *The Ascent of Man*). Harford is better than Levitt - to whom the books owes its format, cheek and some of the original research - because he's less delighted (: sociopathic) about the unflattering anti-humanist results people have uncovered.

Some of the research is properly astonishing – and thus contentious (I have in mind the 2003 paper that purported to show significant shifts in [expressed] sexuality as the AIDS epidemic peaked, in proportion to how well people personally knew sufferers, “cost of AIDS”.) In any case, Harford writes extremely clearly about technical things, and the research can't be ignored, because it suggests routes for generalised policy (rather than cynical rules to apply to all individual cases).

Extra point for his lovely immanent-performative ontology of maths: he claims cricket players and economic actors *are doing* maths unconsciously when they catch a ball or opt for an optimum (third-order differentials). This implies that sunflowers are mathematicians - that all the world is not merely describable

with maths, but acts as maths, *is* maths. I don't believe this, but isn't it lovely?

4/5.

- **Flat Earth News** (2010) by Nick Davies. Calmly furious hatchet job on what I will call mainstream media - but don't thereby imagine me in a tin hat. I was on a news diet anyway (though this *doesn't* mean politically disengaged), so this told me what I'd already nastily assumed: commercial ownership of outlets means vast staff cuts and over-milked productivity; which mean no time to research or check facts; which means "churnalism", the frantic-lazy reproduction of PR and State material, and worse, their interpretations. (88% of all stories are now based on press releases. This trend includes the *Guardian* (50%) and *Times* (59%).) His model of the origin of hysterical snowball stories like the Millennium Bug or Diana's death is brilliant and convincing, disparaging conspiracy-theory suspicions

1. Uncertainty exists.
2. An expert sexes up the dangers to increase popular impact.
3. Impact stirs commerce, who exaggerate for gain.
4. Exaggeration is absorbed by cranks (cultists, columnists), who begin to scream.)

Economise, kowtow, slink, hegemonies, neutralise, service, decontextualise, validate, exaggerate and conform: the rules of production. Was balling my fists through most of this.

4*/5.

- **Notes from a Native Son** (1964) by James Baldwin. Cultural and autobiographical essays by a lionised black-consciousness writer. His attention to pop representations of blacks prefigures the modern Left (Racealicious and Feministing) by 60 years; his political wit and casual familiarity with high and low art prefigures Clive James, though with more weight and tragedy put upon him. 'The Fire Next Time' is the single piece to give anyone who wonders whether quiet, structural racism has all that much effect on people.

4/5.

- **Questioning Identity** (2000) ed. Kath Woodward. Bleh. I'll continue to give radical sociologists a chance to show me they have something to say, because - although the evidence is not good that they do - the consequences of ignoring them wrongly are too awful.

2/5.

- **Consciousness Explained** (1993) by Daniel Dennett. Damn: impressed. The title's supreme arrogance is misleading: his prose is clear, stylish and flowing, he's as expert in the relevant experiments as any neuroscientist, and he's much less hectoring in book form – he admits his theory's counter-intuitive and hostile appearance, he flags alternate positions and possibilities, and it's hard to doubt him when he says he'd change his mind if the science pointed away from his detailed eliminativism. And yet it doesn't? I am *very* resistant to functionalism and mind-brain identity – in fact I've never been able to take it seriously - so that he manages to patch my failure of imagination is a mark of the book's power.

You begin to wonder – for instance when he talks about his work on children with multiple personalities disorder – if he's cultivating a humane exterior to make his theory more palatable. But it's probably just that our backlash against his loud, cartoon atheism overlooks his humanity. The first section, where he admits the wonder and difficulty of studying consciousness, and carefully lays out the method ahead, is a model for modern scientifically engaged philosophy – and at the end he suggests a dozen novel, detailed experiments to test his theory (ante up). I begrudge it being so amazing but won't deny that it is. Read it (and *The Conscious Mind*) if you want to have a serious opinion about mind: you shouldn't entirely agree, but nor can you ignore. Minus a half for being twenty years old in a field where that matters.

4*/5

questionable utility of his field – he doesn't seem to help some of the people, let alone cure them – and this makes the book.

3/5.

- **Hamewith** (1979) by Charles Murray. I'm away from home, and so must retreat into an archaic and falsely distinctive version of it. ("*Thir's a pig in ilka bed.*")'s poems about Aberdeenshire were written from , and they're funny and surprisingly brutal. Some jingoism too, unfortunately, though check out 'Dockens Afore His Peers' for subversion. He avoids the kailyard by focussing on tatties instead (the Classics, drunks and work-sore backs, over the lad o' pairts and the light on the rapeseed).

4/5.

- **Buzz: The Science of Caffeine and Alcohol** (1999) by Stephen Braun. I only recently started dosing caffeine, so thought I'd check up on it. This is fun, with lots of historical flavour and scientific wonder. The coolest fact in it is that the body's direct link between effort and fatigue is the result of an incredibly elegant cycle using adenosine: the production of energy in the body (by breaking down adenosine triphosphate) is exactly the same process as inducing sleep, as the process' byproduct adenosine triggers dampening receptors in the brain. He doesn't give a straight answer to the question "Does our rapid formation of caffeine tolerance make its long-term effects zero-sum?" but the evidence isn't good.

3/5.

- **The Steep Approach to Garbadale** (2007) by Iain Banks. Banks was super-important to me as a boy – *The Crow Road*, though even darker than his sinister average, offers a sincere and positive vision of atheism – but I've been less enthralled on rereading the real-world novels (while his scifi feels instantly classic). This is relatively light, offering the familiar Banks themes: the extended-family drama, a focus on human foibles, and globalised , which are inexhaustible enough.

3*/5.



(c) Timothy Leo Taranto, (2013) "Ernest Lemingway"

*Here's the bird that never flew,
Here's the tree that never grew,
Here's the bell that never rang,
Here's the fish that never swam.*

- Glasgow city motto

*Mankind has various ways, some of them too technical to register as art, of adding
to the store of beautiful things.*

- Clive James

Unemployment, so the library. (Free meaning, also free heating.) Worked back up to my big themes (Formal theory v informal humanity, Scottish independence, the contemporary Left). Books by Gill, Malcolm X, Rousseau, and Moran pose a really big question: how should we read people with moral or political failings? I blab on about this here.

OCTOBER 2013

- ***Open the Door!*** (1920) by Catherine Carswell. Wise but wearing bildungsroman, full with super-Romantic sincerity. Joanna's life is about embracing pleasure and freedom, but is suffused with the bible; even living godlessly, J thinks in its language and punishes herself in its mood. Unconventionally emotional: while she doesn't love her husband ("What they had was not love, but it had beauty, and it served.") and doesn't grieve her mother's death, Joanna (and Carswell) are brimming with strange new emotions: at one point she's thrilled to ecstasy by a dripping tap. ("It was the still small voice of a new birth, of a new life, of a new world... For it was the voice before creation, secure, unearthly, frail as filigree yet faithful as a star.") Ornamented, worthy, but hard work. Probably important.

3/5. [Library]

- Read on the bus: ***Moranthology*** (2012) by Caitlin Moran. Gleeful but rarely zany. I don't laugh at books much, but snorted all the way through this on a long megabus. The middle section on class and gender is light and uncliched and makes her fall from grace among strict people all the sadder.

4/5

- ***The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat*** (1985) by Oliver Sacks. Repetitive and overwrought, but also of course astonishing and extravagant and humane. Quirky case-study format and title suggest a voyeuristic pop sci jaunt, but it's deadly serious, theoretically couched, concerned with the poor buggers' well-being. He's against "mindless neurology and bodiless psychology", the long tradition of cognitive elitism and relegation of emotion and spirit in his field. "Disease is not always just an affliction, but sometimes a proud engine of altered states" – so a man with severe Tourette's is an excellent pro jazz drummer, a woman with debilitating migraines is the polymath Hildegard of Bingen. Sacks has a funny habit of using philosophers' names as misrepresentative pejoratives – a man with radical amnesia is a 'Humean' (a flow of unrelated sensations), a woman who loses sense of her own body has a 'Wittgensteinian' life (because doubting the hinge proposition 'here is a hand'). Actually, that last one works, never mind.

4/5

- ***Seeing Things*** (1991) by Seamus Heaney. Don't like nature poets. I can't pardon their casual nihilism about science and humanity, however much beautiful innocence they display. But Heaney's a naturalist, not a nature poet. He talks about the same few things – stone, dirt, the nature of light for a child, the act of building, wind – hundreds of times and still casts newness. It hurts to read it, for some reason – he's never miserable, and rarely handles tragedy explicitly, but I get tight behind my eyes, short of breath.

3/5. [Library]

- Read aloud: ***The Shape of the Violin*** (1997) by Andrea Camilleri. Cynical but not very cynical, funny but not very funny. Uses food for comic and existential relief between murders. Maybe Sicilians love the book's local colour, but meh. Half a point to compensate for translation.

2.5/5

- ***A Point of View*** (2011) by Clive James. Ah! pleasure. What others get out of Wodehouse or Rowling, I get from this grumpy old Australian's stoic nonfiction. Had my notebook handy the whole way through, sieving gold gobbets.

4*/5. [Library]

- ***The Education of a British-Protected Child*** (2009) by Chinua Achebe. Title suggests nostalgia for colonialism, a gag which needs you to know who he is to work. He waffles a bit, full of avuncular banality as well as post-colonial ire. The most shocking anecdote is of Jim Crow in Africa – up to 1961, black people had to sit behind a partition at the back of the bus, in fucking Zambia.

3/5. [Library]

- ***The Classical World: Homer to Hadrian*** (2005) by Robin Lane Fox. Was tired of my own titanic ignorance (Where was Carthage? Were Spartans Communist? Did Greeks ever love their wives? What did upper class women do all day?) and

mostly got answers. Bit of a story-book, though he does always tell us when he papers over something controversial. Most common phrases in this are ‘surely’ and ‘in my view’ (e.g. he just says that the Greeks probably had our kind of parental affections), which is nice.

3/5. [Library]

- **Killing Us Softly: The Sense and Nonsense of Alternative Medicine** (2013) by Paul Offit. Heinous illusions leech £200bn off the world’s vulnerables, annually. The problems of CAM have been covered with more originality and verve by Goldacre / Singh & Ernst, but Offit covers its history, as well as some newer meta-analyses (2005: n=136,000 finds increased mortality from dosing vitamin E. 2008: Cochrane (n=230,000) concludes multivits correlate weakly with *increase* in cancer and heart disease risk, further confirmed in 2011). But you can’t hear these ideas too often:

*there’s no such thing as conventional or alternative medicine
(only stuff that works and stuff that doesn’t);
everything is chemicals;
origin is irrelevant to chemistry;
too much of a good thing is lethal;
the natural is not always or generally good.*

I’d say Offit’s too quick to jump from the conclusive (weak-magnitude) evidence against multivitamins (particularly overdosing vitamins A, C, and E) to his simple attack on all supplementation. For instance: some two-thirds of the world is deficient in vitamin D; few people get enough magnesium through their food; and it’s uncontroversial that vegists should supplement B12 and creatine. But we’re not really in conflict, because he’d change his mind if he looked at the evidence, and we each accept that (public-funded) science will out the truth.

Prose 2/5, ideas 4*/5. [Library]

- **Previous Convictions** (2009) by AA Gill. What an excuse of a man he can be, but what a writer he always is. The piece on golf’s characteristic - hilarious, fluid, razor-bladed. The basic problem with him: his horror of golf would be better spent on actually horrific things (e.g. his own aestheticised violence). To

be fair the second half's travel pieces spend exactly that: from being right in amidst hallucinatory police brutality in Haiti, to the Africa pieces which buck stereotypes and complacency. There's vast sensitivity or sensibility in him, but he pairs it with a kind of generalisation (e.g. "begging is a consequence of opportunity, not poverty") and off-piste counter-PC phrasemaking, as if to shock us out of respecting him. He uses Jeremy Clarkson brilliantly – as stooge, counterpoint to Gill's own professed post-masculine, pro-gay, pro-grey, pro-oppressed enlightenment. But then he reports all these uber-macho exploits and self-conscious leering at women. What compels him to be so indirect about being progressive? It's that he wants to be both LAD and liberal intellectual, but needs the approval of neither side.

4/5. [Library]

- *Feynman* (2011) by Jim Ottaviani and Leland Myrick. Properly brilliant man with a peerless anti-authoritarian anti-pomp streak. But this is hagiography, presenting his good puns as profundities and his bad puns as good puns. It avoids his maths and almost avoids physics, which needless to say is vitiating in dealing with the Lives of technicians. Worthwhile for its 20-page comic distillation of his (already distilled) pop masterpiece QED.

2/5. [Library]

- *My Shit Life So Far* (2009) by Frankie Boyle. He is more than he'd have us think – but that isn't saying much, since his core gag is wanking over inappropriate objects and taunting the weak. Book's tolerable when he's busy liking things – Chomsky's politics, Grant Morrison's comics, Moorcock, old Clydeside socialism – and hating on the powerful (he disses working in the civil service). A cursory rant against PC, which he bizarrely (satirically?) blames on the Mail. Humane islands in an insincere sea. On marriage: "Fuck it, I tried"; "we struggled along like badly set bones". Makes Gill look like Tolstoy. Higher humour's about laughing at yourself.

2/5.

- Read aloud: ***The City and the City*** (2009) by China Miéville. Heavy-handed metaphysical mystery (“there is another world - economic world, national world - visible but the vision suppressed”). His usual incandescence is present under a shade: the prose is conventional, with spectacular Miévillian words like ‘topolganger’ (identical-but-Other place) popping up only twice a chapter, rather than page. Similarly his characteristic details – protagonist Borlu is in an open relationship with a woman identified only as an economic historian. Hints of the Matrix’s ontological sensationalism and noir’s worn-out idioms, but it works because Mieville’s good enough (with ontology, but also generally) to redeem clichés. tC&tC twists repeatedly without losing credibility; the Cities’ omnimalevolent atmospheres make great noir. There’s even a rooftop showdown. An unfair consequence of extreme talent is that your ‘merely’ interesting well-constructed books are marked down, judged by ghostly expectations.

3*/5.

- ***Out of the Storm: The Life and Legacy of Martin Luther*** (2006) by Derek Wilson. Poppy, secularish, filled a large gap. Downplays Luther’s anti-Semitism, who knows if rightly. A huge, dictatorial person, without whom fake European unity could have continued and prevented Enlightenment and the attempt at real European unity.

3/5. [Library]

rewiring, infidelious twinges and infant irrationality).

4/5. [Library]

- **Celebrity Culture** (2006) by Ellis Cashmore. Kinda lightweight sociology. Picked it because it asks the right questions in its Contents (“What part did consumer society play in making us dote on celebrities? When did the paparazzi appear and how do they pedestalise and destroy people? How are cosmetic surgery and the preoccupation with physical perfection linked to celebrity culture? Why have black celebrities been used as living proof of the end of racism? How have disgrace and sexual indignity helped some celebrities climb onto the A-list?”). But while chatty, he’s critical in an uncritical way, high on anecdote, low on data - and there are no footnotes. Cashmore’s answers are thus suspect, trendy. The big contrarian move in sociology is to view fans as active & canny manipulators of the ‘culture’ (...)

2/5.

- **The Book of Dead Philosophers** (2008) by Simon Critchley. List of little biographies, ends and attitudes to endings. Plenty of good anecdotes – Avicenna’s raging horn, Nietzsche’s supposed ‘lethal masturbation’, Ayer vs Tyson – but Critchley’s argument (“my constant concern in these seemingly morbid pages is the meaning and possibility of happiness”) is lost to me in the plurality of attitudes on display. His new canon is a success anyway, including as it does Mohists and Daoists, Christian saints, John Toland, women. Good toilet book, or introduction to (continental) philosophy.

3/5. [Library]

- **Interpreting Pollock** (1999) by Jeremy Lewison. Does Expressionism do anything but look cool and foil the old School of Paris? I’m a slave to content, so I resent the mindless haste and vitiating freedom of Pollock and Co’s anti-painting, born of the macho belief in chaos (cf. Hunter Thompson, Jim Morrison, Debord). But Pollock’s not empty nor, really, chaotic. Apart from anything else, he makes Picasso look smooth and Mannered, a useful service. Apart from anything else, nothing made or viewed by humans can be non-representational. I like Full Fathom Five & The Deep (1953).

2/5 [Library]

NOVEMBER 2013

- **Cultural Amnesia** (2008) by Clive James. Dark, teeming cultural biography of C20th humanism and its enemies. James homes down in detail: the century, down to “the relationship between Hitler’s campaign on the eastern front and Richard Burton’s pageboy haircut”. It’s full of faded and non-Anglo stars (Egon Friedell, Arthur Schnitzler, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, Paz, Urena), villains (Brassilach, Celine, Pound, Sartre, Brecht), pop-defining celebrities (Beatrix Potter, Dick Cavett, Michael Mann) and sad outrage. It’s also or really an autobiography, a list of the people and one-liners that struck James as he travelled the century. WW2 and the Soviet Empire dominate as the most deadly instances of the theme “how politics invaded art and came close to killing it”. I can’t suggest this is inappropriate.

Other themes: irrational violence, the nonconformist left, collaborators and fellow-travellers, achievements by Jewish people, the failure of totalitarian simplicity, ‘the American century’, rise and fall of jazz. He falls for clash-of-civilisation talk a bit, but he’s never conservative without a reason. I think what I love about him is that he stands up for boring truths – ‘it takes another power to keep a power in check’, “the law’s imperfections are tokens of its necessity” etc.

5?/5. [Library]

- **Read loud: The Divine Comedy** (2013) by Dante and Clive James. He claims Amnesia took him 40 years to write and that this translation took 50. Lucky he saw the two keystones to the end! I was surprised by how much of Dante’s this audacious fleshing out of vague Scripture is revenge verse; standing in judgment over historical (Alexander, Attila) and contemporary enemies (his Latin teacher). He was probably echoing Church proclamations, but still: the author as towering demigod. After Book One you’d be forgiven for thinking that most people in hell are Italian. It’s impossible to ignore Dante’s medieval sneer in places (even though he was a big liberal by the going standard): he parades the Church’s varied idiot retributions, some of which persist, e.g. promising suicidal folk that they are going to get *fucked up*, or having sweet modest Epicurus roasted alive forever for holding the soul to be mortal. The final, most irredeemable circle of hell is reserved for, well, me: childless anti-nationalist atheists. Didn’t quite have the stamina, but I’ll be back.

4/5 but da capo. [Library]

- **Radical Evolution: The Promise and Perils of...** (2005) by Joel Garreau. Pop account of scary/apotheosising technological accelerations and explosions. (AKA transhumanism v bioconservatism.) We face four types of potentially dislocating technologies: Genetics, Robotics, Infotech and Nanotech. Garreau gives loads of stage time to two dogmatic cranks from each side: Kurzweil (booster technocrat), and Fukuyama (neocon fearmonger) as well as an unclassifiable polymath, Lanier. But this is the way science journalism is done, and Garreau is later courageous in half-endorsing the transcendent transhuman rationale of beautiful bioprogressive Bostrom. Unfortunately his prose is Gladwellian, full of glib pop references and leaden line-break punch-lines. Still a balanced intro to the scenarios and figureheads.

Prose **2/5**, object **4/5**. [Library]

- **Fooled By Randomness** (2004) by Nassim Taleb. I had skipped this, assuming I had the full contrarian worldview from Black Swan and Bed of Procrustes. But it's a different beast, more playful and modest, with less of his latter-day overstatement and invalid ad hominem. As anti-disciplinary provocateur and writer of empirical art he is unbeaten (I rank him with Nietzsche for delightful arrogance and hard-ass enculturation.) Still, these ideas (from cognitive science and applied statistics) are hard: one needs several runs at them. Taleb is a great introduction, then Kahneman and Gigerenzer for the calm conservative estimate.

4*/5.

- **Identity and Violence** (2006) by Amartya Sen. Nice: in one ugly sentence 'how overlooking intersectionality ruins worldviews and gets folks killed'. He repeats this idea fifty times or so, but it's a good one. It's stats-free but I trust him, he's proved his mastery.

Widespread interest in global inequalities, of which anti-globalization protests are a part, [is the] embodiment of what Hume was talking about in his claim that closer economic relations would

bring distant people within the reach of a ‘gradual enlargement of our regards to justice’.

– neat, catching the antithesis in the thesis' process. Sen's prose & I don't get on: he's clear and warm but studied in a way that chafes me.

3/5. [Library]

- *Read aloud: Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) by Conan Doyle. Dull, four-fifths preamble. Got whodunit, didn't see why.

2/5. [Library]

- *The Great Equations* (2008) by Robert Crease. Droll, scientifically proficient, philosophically superconductive. The cast is standard – ‘Pythagoras’, Newton, Euler, Boltzmann, Maxwell, Einstein, Heisenberg – but his treatment’s lucid and alive to the art and philosophy of the things. (Get this: “special use of language, often over the heads of untrained readers, that seeks to express truths concisely & with precision, that allows us to understand otherwise inaccessible things, changing our experience in the process” – equations, or poems?)

Thermodynamics is best, casting physicists as Shakespearean (there were four suicides in the twelve of them). Crease wants science to have cultural presence, since at the moment it has authority, cultural reputation without real presence). He suggests that “science criticism” is the way to get this - not in the sense of know-nothing postmodernists attacking instrumentalist hegemony (Holmes on Cochrane), but as in the work of engaged human bridges between practitioners and audience. Every art has a surfeit of such critics. Pop science comes close, but it’s more often cheerleading and radical simplification than artful play on precedents, implications and meaning. Well, here’s at least one example. (See also the Edge and 3QuarksDaily people.)

4/5. [Library]

- *Slavery by Another Name* (2008) by Douglas Blackmon.

The South deluded itself that the Negro was happy in his place; the North deluded itself with the illusion that it had freed the Negro.

– MLK.

Toe-curling account of the extra century of de facto slavery in America: hidden in plain sight from 1865-1945, hidden in archives and historians' de-emphasis since then. 'Jim Crow segregation' is a grave euphemism. (I didn't know the first thing about it, but assumed the South had something of the sort judging by lack of progress after formal emancipation.) Sham laws, racist courts, and 'prisoner leasing' led to millions of (especially) black men spending years in forced labour for 'vagrancy' (being black in the street). Blackmon's research is no doubt exemplary, but his prose is a big dim bulb.

3/5. [Library]

- *Desperately Seeking Paradise: Journeys of a Sceptical Muslim* (2005) by Ziauddin Sardar. Wanted a life of Muhammad to match the life of Luther, but the available biographies were credulous, downplaying his Machiavellian – or rather, since successful, 'Napoleonic' – accomplishments and mercantile background. So, the 'sceptical Muslim' it is, and a good thing too: Sardar has been everywhere, involved in every big event in the Muslim world for 40 years. He gets beaten up by Iranian revolutionaries; sees Bin Laden in Peshawar in '85; is offered £5m by the Saudis to shut up; is at Anwar's side in Malaysia; his nephew worked in the WTC in late 2001. He shows the full crushing procession of forces in Muslims' lives – Western bootprints old and new, Israel locking up 1.6 million and scattering a million others to the wind, the former Ba'athists, the Brotherhood, the 'simpleton' Tablighi Jamaat, Saudi power soft and hard, and a dozen home-grown oppressions and gross inequalities. Sardar in the middle: willing the backward chaos to end, but recoiling from the resulting medieval theocracies. "But maybe paradise does not want to be found".

4/5. [Library]

- *Consider the Lobster* (2005) by David Foster Wallace. Ah, ah. Postmodern and prescriptivist, enthusiastically wise, Wallace was the one, as loveable as

intellectual, as iconoclastic as judicious. He's the model of finding meaning in places beyond sanctioned loci like Dostoevsky and 9/11: in for example an old sincere conservative, in tennis, and arthropods. Not that he 'found' meaning: he generated it, erupting bittersweet priority over parts of the world held to be artless or empty. Theoretically rococo and colloquially concentrated. Our loss is marked. It's disappointing that 'Consider the Lobster', his more or less honest analysis of vegetarianism, founders and shrinks from responsibility. (In short, the piece says "they feel: so why do we do this?". But he asks: "Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure? Is the previous question irksomely PC or sentimental?" without discounting the latter weaselly ad hominem aspersions.) Tensions: he insisted on democratic clarity and yet wrote wilfully distracting pieces. But he's one of the ones.

4/5.

- **Both Flesh and Not** (2012) by David Foster Wallace. Bravura essays from all over the cultural instant he encompassed and abruptly let go (1988-2007). They are I suppose dregs, but DFW's dregs are better than decade-projects of others. I can't help but see foreshadows of *Infinite Jest*: he touches on
 - 1) the obsessive, commercial, and religious aspects of pro tennis,
 - 2) the obstacles to good prose about or involving maths,
 - 3) self-conscious engagement with pop (for how else can we understand a world constituted by and obsessed with pop?),
 - 4) 'interpretation-directing' books (like *Jest*), and above all
 - 5) on the need to *build* after waves of high-entropy postmodernism, to work past its crucial (but bewildering) negativities. It was 'obvious' to him that ordinary late-capitalist life is 'at best empty and at worst evil'. But he was *extraordinary*; panoptic, judicious and sensationally beautiful, and that wasn't enough either.

4*/5.

- **The Emotional Brain** (1999) by Joseph LeDoux. Maybe a bit dated, but thoughtful and historical enough. His big contention's that conscious feelings are red herrings: most emotional activity is demonstrably unconscious (though not in a Freudian way). So we should see emotions as products of several separate bodily-response systems: "the word 'emotion' does not refer to any thing the

mind or brain really has or does". Getting there takes a lot of careful conceptual work, debunking old artefacts ("the limbic system"), probing the line between cognition and emotion, evolved emotional setups and enculturated expressions of them. Rather than reporting his theories as settled, he lets us in to the history, experimental setups, and argue for his theory choices. He's well-versed in the philosophy (he cites Rorty!), is a master of fear (research), and I feel smarter coming out of it.

4/5.

- *The Campus Trilogy* by David Lodge.

Changing Places (1978). Beautiful 60s farce, mocking the zany side while accepting the force of the hippy challenge to all sorts of things, lastingly sexism. The jokes rely heavily on the difference in vitality and affluence between 60s Britain and California – one grey and without central heating, the other soaked in optimism, sex and cute subversions. 4/5.

Small World (1984). Even better, more romantic, full of risky narrative moves – regular cinematic cuts, 40 characters in two dozen Richard-Curtis conjunctions, a character commenting on his narrative role, a cod-Japanese passage without articles... Generous and barbed and fun. 4*/5.

Nice Work (1988). I suppose what I like most about Lodge is his marriage of (and subversion of) highfalutin Theory with daft romcom conventions. This last one's grimmer – based more on the mutual misunderstanding and vices of literary theory and industry. Thatcher's jaws lurk in the background. Also race. Robyn, his feminist protagonist is good and 3D, principled and struggling with the contradictions of the radical academic (their privileged position in a system they abhor, 'revolutionary' abstractions, the attack on logocentric realism leading to detachment from lived life where things happen). Robyn's attitude to love inspired this great satire by the Pet Shop Boys. 4/5

Read it!

- **The Retreat of Reason** (2006) by Anthony Browne. Pamphlet about PC by a man most famous for blaming Britain's AIDS on African immigrants. Tricky: the pamphlet is pumped up with outrage, playing with the nastiest fire, and on the

face of it his central claim's the most hallucinatory tabloid racism. On the other hand, he's careful to list PC's achievements, and official figures underlie his arguments. Like everyone, he tries to claim the rational high ground over his enemies, but the connection between identity politics and postmodern irreason is nowhere near the tight caution he claims. However, reality is fucked up; if we can't even *test* any hypothesis which offends anyone, then we really are doomed to delusion.

2/5.

- *Reread: Scott and Scotland* (1932) by Edwin Muir. Exciting, novel and almost totally wrong, in a fertile and important way. Muir diagnoses four hundred years of post-Reformation Scottish art as weak, makes giant claims about national psychology, and traces out a Scottish Renaissance at odds with the nationalists, MacDiarmid in particular (Muir thinks it's not the Union's fault but Knox's.) A sort of radical conservatism. Pairing Muir with Allan Massie's careful hatchet-introduction strikes me as a public service.

4/5.

- *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (1995) by Michael Eric Dyson. Because we have gotten better, old radicals often seem less radical over time. The pragmatic hedonism and secular calm of Epicurus was once fanatically detested, but is now a standard worldview (it's roughly that of the happy scientist); at one time Spinoza's Ethics (determinism, Nature as deity, religious and political tolerance) was the wildest thing ever said in the history of the Christian world; Montesquieu's disgust at aristocratic brutality, gross luxury and torture are commonplaces; Paine's raging insistence on human rights and total secularism are very successful (in Europe at least); and anyone who disagrees with duBois' or MLK's aims is foolish or virulent. Malcolm X has not yet been so incorporated - but on reading his less demagogical stuff (not the early "TOO BLACK, TOO STRONG" variety) you wonder why. Might have been his influential homophobia, but that's hardly stopped other thinkers. (This suggests it's because we have a false, caricature of him in mind, one that believes in whites-as-devils and Fanonian purifying violence.) Dyson does not skimp on his downsides, and tackles the thorniest idea in identity politics: that experience is absolute, and so understanding a group's ideas and values *requires* group membership – that ideas have colour as people do.

4/5. [Library]

- **The Secret Life of Numbers: 50 Easy Pieces** (2006) by George Szpiro. Tiny happy columns on false proofs, primacy wars, Newton as a gigantic loon, and the Swiss maths scene. He assumes no background - explaining primes even - but is concise and so not hand-holding. Lots of repetition because originally standalone columns, lots of bucolia because he likes mathematicians so much. Harsh words for Wolfram, though. The banality of eternal truth:

The next morning Mignotte informed him that he thought the proof [of the 500 hundred year old Catalan conjecture] was correct. They did not rejoice, but they were very happy.

3/5.

- **Shakespeare is Hard, but So is Life** (2002) by Fintan O'Toole. Angry. Angry at lazy teaching, angry at Aristotelian crap being applied to and vitiating Shakey, angry at four hundred years of racists reading Othello. Ra ra raar.

3/5.

- **The Faber Book of Useful Verse** (1988), ed. Simon Brett. Amusing mnemonics and proverbs, mostly from ancients and Victorians. Includes a canto explaining exactly how James Watt's steam engine was different and several songs to remember the list of English monarchs and US presidencies, etc.

3/5.

- **Selected** (1993) by George Mackay Brown. Distrust and death but never self-pity; drowning and drama but wise. Of one place's Vikings, fish, and pain – like *Under Milk Wood* without the japery and authorial distance. Seal Market is amazing; the Hamnavoe poems are so good I feel I've been there (which means I don't have to go). Brown seems stuck writing about the Middle Ages – “what are these red things like tatties? (apples)” – but then the Middle Ages lasted right through to the 1960s, on Orkney. And since “a circle has no beginning or end.

The symbol holds: people in AD 2000 are essentially the same as the stone-breakers of 3000 BC.”

4/5.

DECEMBER 2013

- ***Debt: The First 5000 Years*** (2011) by David Graeber. Forceful anthropology against certain obvious delusions of economics (and from there to the entire globalised world). As exciting as polemic, reliable as literature review, his iconoclasm, logic and impressive clarity are the more impressive for my “bullshit detection” prejudice against anthropology. He goes into an array of new and fucked up human economies, slaving, . He’s careful with evidence, moving from what must be false (the idea that barter preceded money) to a grand identification of the market and the state and then (implicitly) to resistance to them. As someone who went through the great crypto-conservative fairytale that is ‘training’ in positive economics, I can’t fault his argument about barter, but his estimation of its significance is perhaps excessive. An anthropologist who cares about the balance of evidence? Take me now!

5/5. [Library]

- ***Empire*** (2000) by Hardt and Negri. A crock of shit. Economics without reference to anything of production or consumption, Marxism without even speculative economics, melodrama without sweetness. Much less clotted than I’d expected, though: you can read it, you just won’t get anything for your pains.

2/5.

- ***True Brit*** (2004) by Kim Johnson “&” John Cleese. Superman Englishman, Jonah Jameson Murdoch. I don’t much care for the core commercial thing Marvel and DC do where they reboot series over and over with one new gimmick – Commie Hulk, Zombie Hulk, Nihilist Hulk. One good joke “We

should have taught him to control himself, like a true Brit”.

2/5. [Library]

- **Kick-Ass 2** (2013) by Millar and Romita Jr. Eh; art's really good, dialogue and world are lazy, hardcorer-than-thou (the one centrefold is of a groin being bitten; “I feel like Rihanna after a quiet night in”). Inevitable matching gangs of vigilantes and villains form after pioneer, attendant cheap gags (“I’m Insect-Man!”). The bit where they tweet each other is good (and surreally true, à la the last Israel incursion). “I guess the cops couldn’t tell the heroes from the bad guys.” Yeah.

2/5. [Library]

- *What Should a Person Be?* (2010) by Sheila Heti. Ooft. Uncomfortable, nor in the way we’re used to. Autobiographical metafictional first-world problems: unrequited narcissism and joint solipsism. Also writer’s block. It’s hard to talk about pretentious things that know they are and discuss it well: this is sophomoric navel-gazing, but masterful about sophomorism and novel about the navel. So it directs interpretation – ‘I can’t call it wanky, it just called itself wanky’. Heti’s deadly serious about frivolous things, but also important ones (e.g. the passage detailing her sexual masochism, or ‘The White Men Go to Africa’, mocking poverty tourists.) The artistic equivalent of a hundred selfies. Distinctive and intended even when dull. The answer to the title is “My friend Margaux but not too much so” (twee and wilful and sceptical and direct).

3/5. [Library]

- **The Art of Thinking Clearly** (2013) by Rolf Dobelli. Shonky list of cognitive biases / love letter to Taleb. It has occasioned raging critique rather than reciprocation. At first I was very taken by Dobelli’s article ‘Why you shouldn’t read news’, and still think there’s something to it (particularly as goes news’ inevitable over-dramatisation of reality via availability bias and our inbuilt credulity), but it’s all Taleb’s work, except unjustified and not actually good. (Consider that one is to free-ride and, in the hypothetical aggregate of a trend of people quitting news, suppress journalism’s deterrent effects on governmental and business malfeasance.) Anyway his Art isn’t well-organised or

-conceptualised – he stretches the perhaps 20 reputable cognitive biases of Kahneman et al into 99 anecdotal smirks. (Redundancies: he splits illusion of control and action bias, the paradox of choice and decision fatigue...) – consider the ‘It’s-gotta-get-worse-before-it-gets-better effect’. The big problem for the heuristics and biases program is when you get contradictory pairs of biases – how can people be both? The actual researchers have done well in synthesising these and providing base-rates for effect sizes (without which the programme is little more than a new way for intellectuals to insult each other). Dobelli offers no classification, effect sizes, or even citations (they’re hidden online), just clomping informational candy. Taleb for dummies. (Where Taleb is already Kahneman for dramatists.)

2/5. [Library]

- **Statistics: Conventional Methods and Modern Insights** (2009) by Rand Wilcox. Introductory versions of knowledge are usually misleading (e.g. the eukaryotic cell, first described to me as a circle with a dot in when it’s really a fourth-order factory crammed full of reflexive difficulty). Wilcox’s excellent obvious idea is to render advanced post-Fisher statistical fixes in ordinary language and teach them from the get-go, so to preclude the damaging simplification that most people (who don’t spend three years studying it) take away from Stats 101. (If Economics were to make the same qualifications in its freshman iteration, the business world would be unmasked as more obviously ideological and unjustified.) Wilcox’s big three modern fixes are Winsorizing, bootstrapped confidence intervals, and non-linear estimators of the Theil-Sen variety. It’s worth going for posher books on technical matters, since a single extra insight goes a long way there.

4/5.

- **The Overflowing Brain: the Limits of Working Memory** (2009) by Torkel Klingberg. Nice gentle probe of our faddish fear that tech is pumping too much info through us, and thereby vitiates our brains and produces ADHD. Working memory, if you haven’t heard, is trumpeted as *the* constitutive component of intelligence. Klingberg’s optimistic about it all, pointing to the Flynn effect as an epidemiological sign that we are (cognitively) ok with being overloaded. His own research is much more promising about training working memory and gF

than others I'd read.

3/5.

- ***Prescriptions for the Mind: A Critical View of Contemporary Psychiatry*** (2008) by Joel Paris. Not what you'd expect ("DSM hiss!! Pharma woo!!"). An 'evidence-based psychiatrist' (a good guy), his main target is people who overinterpret current neuroscience and just churn out pills. He concedes that the old analysts were 'brainless' but calls the worst of the new brain-scan boom 'mindless'. The evidence for talk therapy – things like CBT (for anxiety and personality disorders) – is much better than I'd thought, and Paris reckons this is now overlooked in favour of cheaper and truer biological determinism. A good, hard thing to say: "What causes mental illness? By and large, advances in neuroscience notwithstanding, we still don't know."

3/5.

- ***Gods and Soldiers: Penguin Contemporary African Writing*** (2009). Africans set down in English, whether by birth or choice (or translation choice). 'Contemporary' is pushing it a bit, since these pieces are from the last sixty years, but the scope raises the bar. Achebe laid the ground for Anglophone (and Francophone) writing when mocking the incommensurability people. A piece about Aberdeen oil (Leila Aboulela)!

4/5.

- ***The Ig Nobel Prize*** (2002) by Marc Abrahams. Sublimely silly: my favourite piece of modern art. The joke is the same each time – informality in formal contexts – but like modern art it's the framing makes them. The titles alone: Williams & Newell (1993) 'Salmonella Excretion in Joy-riding Pigs'; Wyatt McNaughton (1993) 'The Collapse of Toilets in Glasgow'; Watanabe & Sakamoto (1995) "Pigeons' Discrimination of Paintings by Monet & Picasso"; Solodi (1996) "Farting as a Defence against Unspeakable Dread".

4/5.

- ***Triumph of the City: Our Greatest Invention*** (2011) by Ed Glaeser. Engrossing optimistic catalogue of counter-intuitions of urban economics: “poverty can mean a city’s doing well, since they wouldn’t stay, otherwise”, “cities are greener and more democratic (smaller houses, less travel, scale utilities)”, “zoning laws ensure prices are too high, apartments too small, congestion, sprawl, slums and corruption”, “people are less unhappy and less suicidal in cities”. Glaeser’s aims are larger than simple Gladwellian gee-whizz information: he’s out to get a prevailing anti-city mood (e.g. Blake, Rousseau, Thoreau, hippies). Explains why art is urban, why we didn’t have good ideas before settlements, the origins of the restaurant (in a crap Parisian health-food place), the skyscraper, and the global bank Chase Manhattan (in a scam defrauding money meant for NY’s first public water supply). Valuing the devalued, staying within evidential warrant, and honest about the achievements of public agencies, for an American economist.

4/5.

- ***The Selfish Capitalist*** (2008) by Oliver James. Much less glowing about the modern way. His thesis is the *Spirit Level* again: social inequality and the ultra-individualism of the last 30 years hurts everyone. Amazing how dated this book seems when it discusses Cheney’s ties to Halliburton, or that John Perkins guy. Another world. James attacks CBT (praised for its effectiveness in Paris, above) as the psychic equivalent of overmedication – “society makes people anxious and then reprograms them to fit in with the anxiety” – which seems a bit much. Empirically dubious but at least clear.

2/5.

- ***Present Laughter*** (1982), ed. Alan Coren. Strange anthology of mostly amazing excerpts from e.g. Wodehouse, Naipaul, Thurber, Perelman, Joyce, Updike. I say strange because some of them are more poignant than funny, and the only connection seems to be that they tickled Coren. I say mostly cos there’s a couple of nasties mixed in (e.g. someone called Keith Waterhouse’s racist Caribbean calumny). But drowned out; see them as historical, what Punch magazine has always represented.

4/5.

- ***Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*** (1993) ed. Emilie Amt. This is the thing: primary sources in all their muddled import, but abridged so as to avoid the four years of sifting it takes to know what's important in a given historical period. Was surprised by how obsessed with precise fines pagan society was – you can tell the monotheists' moralising from the lack of numbers. Many of the mortal heresies of the time were about giving women more respect – teaching them to read, letting them be judges... The tone of voice is often alien – and a good thing too.

3/5.

- ***A House Built on Sand: Exposing Postmodernist Myths about Science*** (1999) ed. Noretta Koertge. Title is more strident than the excellent contents. Their common target is the over-interpretation and over-socialised Foucauldian muddle of seeing society in supposedly objective scientific matters. Some – especially Collins – lump in dogmatic radfems with more scholarly and right-on constructivists. My admiration of Sokal grows - his entry is both the clearest and the most constructive. The book also furnished me with a large and excellent distinction, Phillip Kitcher's one between two incompatible but valuable modes of thought: the 'realist-rationalist' and the 'social-historicist', which form a spectrum that most people unforgiveably cluster at the ends of.

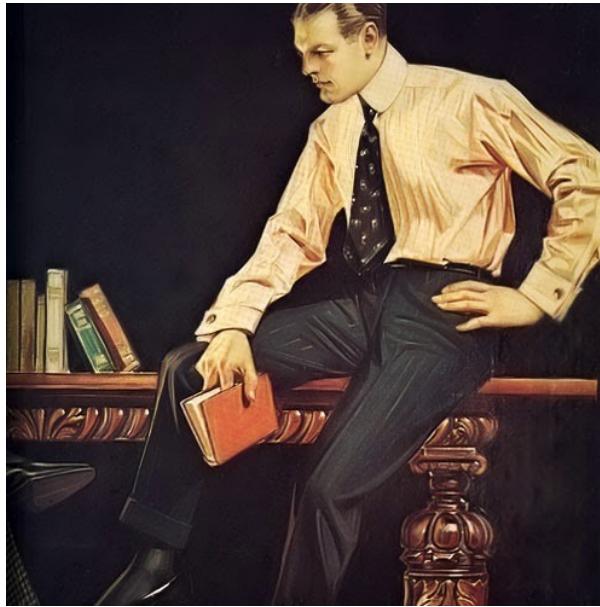
4*/5.

- ***The Pursuit of Unhappiness*** (2009) by Daniel Haybron. I find it hard to think about happiness, and the first great thing this does is show I'm not alone. The next is to pick up an abandoned conception of happiness as (mere) emotional state, rather than common broad-base ideas – happiness as net pleasure, as being in a good overall situation, being treated justly, as the net outcome of a whole life (Solon), etc. The third is admitting the twin awful points that we are neither good judges of our own happiness nor skilled at pursuing happiness. He nonetheless resists the decentring findings of cognitive psychology (and they *are* frequently overturned). Haybron appreciates the virtue revolution in ethics while subordinating it to well-being. He has read everything. In a sweet but possibly inadmissible strategy, his paradigm for a happy society is an unnamed fishing community in an island somewhere on the Pacific – the tiny size, low-stress and natural fixations being emotionally 'best' for people. Yeah, maybe mate.

5?/5.

The placebo is a tangible object made essential in an age that feels uncomfortable with intangibles, an age that prefers to think that every inner effect must have an outer cause. Since it has size and shape and can be hand-held, the placebo satisfies the contemporary craving for visible mechanism. But the effect dissolves on scrutiny, telling us that it cannot relieve us of the need to think deeply about ourselves. The placebo, then, is an emissary between the will to live and the body. But the emissary is expendable.

- Norman Cousins



(c) "The Arrow Collar Man" (1921) by Joseph Leyendecker

The birth of information theory came with a ruthless sacrifice of meaning: forget human psychology; abandon subjectivity... But who could love a theory giving false statements as much value as true statements? It was mechanical. It was dessicated... Has that hellish world, full of information and devoid of grace, arrived? A world of information glut and gluttony; of bent mirrors and counterfeit texts; scurrilous blogs, anonymous bigotry, banal messaging. Incessant chatter. The false driving out the true?

That is not the world I see.

- James Gleick

I publicly and fearlessly declare that anyone... who will examine my nature, my character, my morals, my likings, my pleasures, & my habits with his own eyes & can still believe me a dishonourable man, is a man who deserves to be stifled.

- Rousseau

as a young man I thought the ideal philosophical argument was one with the following property: someone who understood its premises and did not accept its conclusion would die.

- Robert Nozick

Another prejudice pointed out: I don't review the blogs or articles I read. It's not even that they're too numerous to bother with, for I've no home internet access. I like to think this means I live among crystalline info. But I also don't reflect on films – nor webcomics – nor the semiotics of my colleagues' clothing choices: if the implicit criticism is that I and my nearest cultural kin - the temperamentally afk - are subject to a big old retrograde print fetish, then yes it's obviously so. It's a fetish with implications, too, for the hardcore generalist, cos key work in many fields - maths, sociology, economics, physics - is only ever published in article form, at least until it appears in pop science books fifteen years later. Hoorah for Access to Research, then!

The fact remains: a book's content is very likely to be more balanced, original, and stable than work that can be researched, composed, and published in the time before the lady at Costa starts to scowl at you for sitting with a laptop and a cold mochafrappalatino. Anyway there are two journals and some magazines in the following, leave me be.

Am dissatisfied with my scale, emphasising though it does the highest single dimension of any piece: its extent. (By which I mean its durability under the disc-sander of our attention, its being larger than me in whatever terms seem good at the time of reading, beauty or multifariousness or originality or pathos.) The messy reality of writing gives the lie to my scale being numeric at all: fun is usually more exhaustible than meaning, so things which are just very good fun will get a 3*/5 on this scale. Also, reward durability to social change; being larger than the moment it was composed in. Masterful untransferable things like Svenonius' *Foundation* will make me redo the scale; she wrote in granite, but for a forever-limited audience. Problematics get several scores.

JANUARY 2014

- **Knots** (1970) by RD Laing. Wildcard psychologist writes meh tongue-twisters about the horror of recursivity.

“JACK: *Forgive me.*
JILL: *No.*
JACK: *I'll never forgive you for not forgiving me.*”

His point's that conflict escalates because we forget the original contention and argue about the argument instead. If this explanation is not exhaustive, it is anyway very satisfying. His logic's more sophisticated than I expected – “*Jack sees / that there is something Jill can't see and Jack sees / that Jill can't see she can't see it. // Although Jack can see Jill can't see she can't see it / he can't see that he can't see it himself.*” – but repetition kills the wit.

2/5.

- **A Writer at War: Letters & Diaries 1939-45** (2010) by Iris Murdoch, ed. Peter Conradi. Reading letters like these is panning with others' gold-filled pans. Pleased to find her young and conceited – letters laced with ‘mon dieu!’s and ‘passim’ s and ‘ye gods!’es. To my shame, these people are all always learning five languages at once, wittily discussing the exigencies of Turkish declaratives. Interesting how comfortable Conradi is to contradict her – apparently she excised quite a lot from her archive, mostly on sex. Some fuckups despite his obvious breadth (Thompson’s last letter is dated ’43 here!) and one piece of gratuitous dramaturgy: he includes only one reply from (admitted headfuck) David Hicks, making him seem sadistic rather than grudging and aloof. Her generosity / terrible co-dependence in the face of Hicks’ brutal breakup is too moving.

4/5.

- **A Bigger Picture** (2012) by David Hockney. Superficially superficial, Hockney’s the rare man: wholly lovable, highly postmodern. This is a whole retrospective weighted towards his very recent and distinctive work in the Yorkshire woods. The words are less annoying than usual for coffee-table-badge books. Keep looking til you like it.

3*/5.

- **Lost Worlds** (2004) by Michael Bywater. Ooft. Coruscating, funny list of things high and low which are no longer.

“Remember, then, the founding principle of British public life, which is this: if you don’t know already, I’m certainly not going to tell you.”

He knows about apparently everything: network protocols and Latin conjugations, how meerschaums and primitive sweeties were made. It's *Grumpy Old Men* except with teeth, wit, & iconoclasm and without mummery, ressentiment, & squidge. His fond memory of corporal punishment is put a bit irresponsibly, but generally he's balanced, seeing what's been gained by loss. Irresistible examination of our tendency to stupid nostalgia *and* stupid amnesia both. Never heard of him, watch for it.

4/5.

- Read aloud: **A Walk in the Woods** (1997) by Bill Bryson. I don't rate him – his matey adjectival register and cutesy knowledge get on my nerves – but this is really really great. Dead funny throughout, free of bluster, and passionate about marginal researches (the fate of the hemlock tree in Northeast America, the punctuated history of very long US roads). Comforting and galvanising. Even my townie girlfriend wants to go hiking now.

4/5.

- **The Trial of Henry Kissinger** (2001) by Christopher Hitchens.
GRAAAAAAAAAAAAR.

4/5. [Library]

- **Inventing the Enemy** (2012) by Umberto Eco. More like it! Calm, panoptic and ennobling. (Funniest clause all month: "*thus Lenin was a neo-Thomist – without of course realising it.*") There's good sad Realism under his fun semiotic historicism: it's only lazy academic cliques prevent people seeing that the critical realist & the pomo skylark can coexist. So it's a surprise but not a shock to see him use basically Johnson's defence against relativism. High larfs: Eco chides the Church with its own history! Title essay's composed of quotations from virulent historical racists / misogynists / puritans: hard to read. He walks the difficult line between being maximally clear & slightly banal (thus he says things like "Fire is a metaphor for many impulses...", but also:

Trying to understand other people means destroying the stereotype without denying or ignoring the otherness.

). Whose side is he on? The text's!

4/5. [Library]

- ***The Confessions*** (1770) of Jean-Jacques Rousseau via JM Cohen. I am prejudiced against Rousseau, him with his straightforwardly false anthropology, melodramatic politics, and preposterous egotism. His three big legacies are even easier to disparage – ‘Revolution as salvation’, ‘Feelings as truer than thoughts’, and the ‘Noble savage’ dogma. This much arrayed against him, it’s miraculous that *Confessions* (‘the first modern autobiography’) is as clear and wise as it is – a deeply honest story by a deeply deluded man. (Just one instance of courage: to talk about being a sexual sub as a man in eC18th Europe!) A stroppy Forrest Gump – blundering into great events, loudly blaming them for the collision – but he is also large and savvy enough to test the great iconoclasts of his time. (Strong parallels with DH Lawrence, another supremely wilful, influential, and ridiculous soul. Virtue in spite of themselves.) Skim heavily.

3/5. [Library]

- ***I'd Rather We Got Casinos & other Black Thoughts*** (2009) by Larry Wilmore. (The title is as in, “Are you in favor of Black History Month?” “Hell no. Twenty-eight days of trivia to make up for centuries of oppression? I’d rather we got casinos.”)

Irreverent about stuff good people don’t tend to be: ‘community leaders’, the funeral for the n-word, Jesus’ race, Katrina, Letter from Birmingham Jail, The Man. His patter gets pleasurable baroque:

*“A pudgy patron of society would suffer an indignity and cry out,
‘This is unmitigated gall! Unmitigated gall, I tell you!”...*

*“the level of anger in a black church should be roughly equal to the
level of anger in the brother attending said church. You’ll appreciate
the attention to detail in the Afrocentric stained-glass windows as
black Jesus, black Mary, and the black Apostles make even hard
brothers nervous with their never-happy Ice Cube-like glares”...*

*“THE SIMPSONS: Not racist but not very brotha friendly.
FAMILY GUY: Racist but very brotha friendly.”*

Lines this good scattered throughout.

3/5.

- Read aloud: **A Handful of Dust** (1934) by Evelyn Waugh. Funny ruling-class tragedy like he always does. Was at the limits of my sight-reading here; Waugh's timing and compression are too grand to be scuttled aloud, really. Check this out for tight material symbolism:

Beaver had a dark little sitting-room (on the ground floor, behind the dining room) and his own telephone... objects that had stood in his father's dressing room; indestructible presents for his wedding and twenty-first birthday, ivory, brass-bound, covered in pigskin, crested and gold-mounted, expressive of Edwardian masculinity...

(implies so much! That Beaver is subordinate to guests and his dead dad, who was married before 21, unlike him...). Is Brenda's infidelity punished in a regressive Victorian way? Yes. But pater gets his too: the nasty colonialist final act is topped off with a crushing twist: Dickens unto death.

3*/5.

- Article: '**Hume and Prejudice**' (1995) by Robert Palter. Close reading of exactly how *le bon David* totally dismissed one-sixth of the world on no evidence with invalid logic – mistaking contingency for essence, current state for all-time capacity. Palter breaks the question 'How racist was Hume?' into four.
1) 'Of the people he is said to be racist about, who was he racist about?' *Black people*: yes, in an egregious and cruel footnote. Also 'passionately anti-slavery', go figure. *All other non-whites*: at one point, but he contradicts himself in the same edition and in another retracts this idiocy. *Jewish people*: probably not. *Irish*: no. *The French*: no! 2) 'What's the damage?' Unclear. Not an 'enormous influence' [cf. Popkins] anyway. Even some evidence that Hume galvanised his religious critics to be abolitionists, to spite him. 3) 'Is racism entailed by any of his proper philosophical work?' No, and his own social theory rebuts it. ("A small sect or society amidst a greater are commonly most regular in their morals; because they are more remarked, and the faults of individuals draw dishonour on the whole. The only exception to this rule is, when the superstition and prejudices of the large society are so strong as to throw an infamy on the smaller society, independent of their morals.") 4) 'Was Hume a colonialist bigwig? – no.'

Palter sees Hume's prejudice as a grave lapse of his own principles, a sorry indictment, but not the fundamental disqualification that some others do.

4/5.

- ***How I Escaped my Certain Fate*** (2010) by Stewart Lee. An artist, with the bloat and near-repulsive belligerence that involves ("So all I'm saying, if you've not seen me before, yeah, is the jokes are there, but some of you, you might have to raise your game."). Book has tons of general merit: it's about trying to be artful in a genre where populism is a condition of being recognised as a practitioner at all. And Lee just has his shit worked out, is by turns harshly enlightening and plaintively endearing. ("Basically there's a whole generation of people who've confused political correctness with health and safety regulation. 'It's gone mad. They saying I can't have an electric fire in the bath any more, Stew, in case queers see it.'") I even love his intellectual flab: the Wire mag chat, ignoble snarking, and attempt at epic free verse. I trust him – but you can't trust him. (Recent shows are founded on outrageous lies, satirising spin/smear cultures in our media and government and employers and friends.) Hard to know who the joke-explaining footnotes are for – since his fans already get it, and no-one else's going to read this. That said, if you don't like him or don't know about him, please read this. (For instance, he explains that he 'portrays a smug wanker'.)

4/5. [Library]

- ***Sociology, 7th Ed*** (2013) by Anthony Giddens and the other guy. I went to a lot of lectures I wasn't down for, and that's about the extent of my sociological 'training'. I am thus at risk of making *the* mistake of disgruntled undergrads everywhere and assuming that my fantastically limited understanding of a field is all the field is, but: I worry that even this shallow diet exhausted the potential intellectual benefits of the field. Owing to blameless methodological holdups (e.g. the 'causal density' of human behaviour, that little experimentation is possible or fruitful, Hawthorne effects, low statistical power), the benefits are, perhaps, a matter of offering reminders and details of structural oppression, and some new vocabulary - rather than subterranean insight, or either predictive or explanatory progress in the understanding of societies. That's not nothing. Kudos to Giddens for this passage then: "...is sociology merely a restatement, in abstract jargon, of things we already know? Sociology at its worst can be exactly

that..."

It is good at first-order description – social behaviour is incredibly diverse, and that diversity is now subject to accelerating growth in most of the world - to the point where few of us would ever know about the other half's behaviours without social research. Also we can probably never be reminded enough about the ways in which people are grouped up and done down. I suppose I'm just unconvinced of the use of further elaborations, provided that one already doesn't ever persecute behaviours out of ignorance. (That's a vital role for it then: looking at which laws and policies affect whom unfairly, at which common notions inadvertently hurt people.) Sociology can be great at unpicking 'neoliberal' delusions (roughly the set of theodicies that say, "Everything 'bad' is just individuals making free decisions, so back off") – but is (usually) terrible at following through with the counterpart act of constructive doubt: self-criticism, wondering if our neat structural 'explanations' are as general, applicable, or explanatory as we like to think. Finally, my own values certainly constrain my opinion of the field, because it trucks mostly in collective identity, which I see as a series of enormous blocks to human dignity and understanding.

Let's get back to those good new words sociologists have dreamt up – 'socialisation' vs 'structuration', Verstehen oder Erklärung, or the disturbing hypothesis stereotype threat, or the master status of a given society, or the 'manifest' vs the 'latent' functions of an action. Interactionism is the really valuable strand (it is harder for us to disappear up our own ass with our ear that close to the ground).

3/5. [Library]

- Read aloud: *Night of the Living Trekkies* (2010) by Kevin David Anderson. Unremitting. (I only know it's crap even as fan service because I read this to a lifelong fan.) Plot brought to you by a cursory study of Resident Evil spin-offs, and prose by soap operas.

1/5.

- *All the Sad Young Literary Men* (2009) by Keith Gesson. Ivy League Arts boys fail at life, measure themselves against Lenin, cut coupons – "At the same time, Mark had not been with a woman in many months. What would Lenin have done? Lenin would have called Mark's hesitation a social-democratic scruple.

It's pretty clear what Lenin would have done." – 'blech', you say. But it flows so smoothly that it's effortlessly nommed and hard to hold its tragic treatment of untragic subjects against it. It follows history closely – we see [Al Gore]'s daughter at college, and a cartoon [Chomsky] –

Lomaski in his office was sweaty, skinny, ill-preserved, drinking tea after tea so that his teeth seemed to yellow while Sam watched.

There are gauche pictures of Hegel, Lincoln, Gore inserted intext in an equivocal Safran Foer way. Meh. The women – i.e. the boys' ideas of the women – are the fixation, they set the structure and timbre and volume of all else. I think I am hard on it because it is so much the book I would write. Clever, but. (Extra half point for unclichéd Palestine bit.)

4/5.

- Read aloud: **Penguin American Supernatural Tales** (2007) by ST Joshi. I usually find horror pathetic, but this cherry-pick of two centuries is varied, trend-setting, often golden. The phases: High Gothic lit to pulp to magic realism to splatterpunk, but blessedly omitting the most recent and hypersuccessful form, 'paranormal romance'. Hawthorne, Poe, Bloch, Matheson, Oates. I have no patience for Lovecraft and his legion. Henry James' prose is every bit as clotted and unpronounceable as reputed. High point (apart from Poe's 'House of Usher' – a hellhound in a fluffy corset) is probs Theodore Klein's 'The Events at Poroth Farm', a queer sleepy beast with its own internal supernatural anthology and sidewise unnerves.

4/5.

- **Our Posthuman Future** (2002) by Francis Fukuyama. Attack on transhumanism brought to you by a man most famous for being wrong. Now he worries that science is going to make life too easy – that overcoming human evolution's horrible legacy issues (e.g. ubiquitous mental illness, moral myopia, unspeakable death) with biotechnology will amount to the death of the soul. (Where the soul is that which thrives on adversity, is real / spiritual / creative, and Takes Responsibility.) I shouldn't mock; Fukuyama handles this fear secularly and reasonably, and the existential claim is not wrong by definition, and it is nice to see such a man endorse regulation for once. However, his arguments are piss-poor: he argues via 1) using fictional evidence – Brave New World and the

Bible; by 2) suggesting, without evidence, that there are insurmountable trade-offs between longevity and cognition, happiness and creativity, and personality and freedom; and by 3) a truly massive suppressed premise: that Things are ok as they are (or, at least, as good as they get). The first section, laying out 2002's cutting edge in life extension, neuropharmacology, and genetic engineering, is fair and good. He accuses bioethicists of being gung-ho shills for Industry, which is interesting, but untrue in my experience of them as timid precautionists with just about enough knowledge of the technicalities. YMMV.

(4/5 for newbies, alongside Bostrom's 5s.) [Library]

3/5.

- ***The Lathe of Heaven*** (1971) by Ursula K LeGuin. Mighty me. Hot-foot mystical parable afloat on a bed of Tao, psychoanalysis, and Nietzsche. Bad guy's a Grand Unscrupulous Utilitarian: excellent, manipulative, and innocently destructive (Confucius?). Her memorable para-omnipotent protagonist George Orr is put-upon, dismissible, infuriatingly passive (or, rather, wu wei): the Tao. Scifi has a lot of conventions which can easily end in literary clumsiness – think contrived alien names, more or less stupid extrapolations from current science, brooding passages about the damned Capitalised Social Change of Twenty-three-dickety-four – but LeGuin, even this early, was in charge of them. Munificent, a clusterbomb from page one.

4*/5.

FEBRUARY 2014

Two taking much of my spare time from now til August:

- **Open University TM129** (2013). It is mildly shameful to be unable to code in this day and age. Sort yourself out.
4/5.
- **Open University M248: Data analysis** (2013). People sometimes claim that maths gets good *just as soon* you leave behind the rote and miserly formula-mongering of high school for the awing free space of proof's transcendent exploration (i.e., just after almost everyone gratefully leaves it behind.) Stats does *not* get more fun the deeper you go, but it makes itself incredibly useful, for people whose conception of their intellectual life includes doing useful things. Perhaps. Living up to its promise: of summarising a raucously uncertain reality, without adding delusions equal to those it destroys.
2/5 and 5/5.
- Journal: **Proceedings of the Royal Statistical Society, Volume 137, Series A** (2012) by Various. Series A is the "less technical" of their three journals. I won't pretend to be able to follow the dynamic-treatment analysis stuff, but there's a cool bit on Carroll's influence on stats and some dreary obituaries - including a fawning one for Imperial Tobacco's head stats guy in the 50s and 60s!
2/5.
- **The Thistle & the Rose: 6 Centuries of Love & Hate between Scots & English** (2005) by Allan Massie. Light, unpolemical history via small biographies of the obvious (Mary Queen, Scott, Livingstone, Buchan) and nearly unknown (Waugh's granddad, a soldier called Henry Dundas). Charles Churchill on Scots:
*"Into our places, states and beds they creep;
They've got sense to get what we want sense to keep."*

Weighted towards mongrel literary figures and quashing polarisations; Anglo-Scots and pro-Stuart Englishmen feature heavily. (Disproportionately.) He's soft

on empire and Thatcher, but this is out of an unjudgemental attitude in general. Welcome scepticism about some of our organising myths – the idea of a ‘race’ called the ‘Celts’, the idea that Scotland is or has ‘always’ been more Left (when e.g. half the votes in 1955 were Tory).

3/5.

- *Espedair Street* (1987) by Iain Banks. First-person sulk by an ambivalently Scottish, ambivalently Left, ambivalently alive Standard Banks Man. Book aims to study spiritual clumsiness and pop music, ends up in a midlife crisis at 30. Has its moments (“We put a value on what we treasure, and so cheapen it”; “her blonde hair slid across the pillow like gold chains over snow (and for an instant I thought Suzanne takes you down...”)).

3/5.

- *Radical Renfrew* (1990) ed. Tom Leonard. A nice thing about Britain, or the Old World at large, is that there’s a piece of art for most places. Thus even my tiny village has a passable ballad, ‘where the river meets the sea’, while my mate’s Wirral has a full seven hundred years of contempt to draw on, as well as my top album of 1998. Paisley has the first bit of *Espedair Street* – and, what’s more, the hundreds of Industrial pamphlets and gazetteers that Tom Leonard dug through, finding it a hotbed of utopian socialism, zero-wave feminism and farmer’s rage. Moreover, he won: the wiki for Paisley has benefited from Leonard’s revisionism. (I don’t know if it’ll sink in with local schoolkids though; they’re more likely to raise a susurrus over the fact that Gerard Butler went to Paisley Grammar.) See here.

3/5.

- *Overtime* (2009) by Charles Stross. Ace throwaway with British Men-in-Black; they’ve the organisational despair of *Dilbert* more than the existential awe of Lovecraft. (“*My department, Forecasting Operations, is tasked with attempting to evaluate the efficacy of proposed action initiatives in pursuit of the organization’s goals—notably, the prevention of incursions by gibbering horrors from beyond space-time.*”). Expected forbidding, stark post-Ballard nastiness, but it’s matey, British, nerdy (BBC, C++, and Bayes jokes).

3*/5.

- ***The Intellectual Foundation of Information Organisation*** (2000) by Elaine Svenonius. Commanding Analytic philosophy of libraries. Cold and relentlessly substantial, in full command of the many many issues entailed in cramming the output of humanity's outputers into one framework. (It's reassuring that someone is.)

Factual claims about the world constitute only a small subset of information broadly construed... It is not possible, at least without wincing, to refer to The Iliad, The Messiah, or the paintings in the Sistine Chapel as data...

Info studies comes across as the most gargantuan construction, librarians building as they are the least ambiguous & most exhaustive language in the world: the god's eye view of the diary of the human race. Read half, the remainder user's details of bibliographic languages. It's sufficient: now I know to hush & cross myself when a librarian enters the room. (Also: Imagine a better name for a library theorist than 'Svenonius'!)

2/5 & 4*/5.

- Read aloud: ***The Gun Seller*** (2003) by Hugh Laurie. Urgh. Douglas Adams crossed with Ian Fleming, with more of the latter's appalling clumsiness than Adams' philosophical glee. Srs military-industrial politics addressed via flashy froth. I suppose his unmacho, anti-sex secret agent deserves applause, but the gauche chapter epigrams and LOUD joke prose were distressing.

2/5.

- ***Governing the World: The History of an Idea*** (2011) by Mark Mazower. Casually brilliant and persuasive, readable and oddly fond history of the UN *et plus alia*. (I've never understood the fetish for national sovereignty - when you look at what states tend to do with it.) Practical cosmopolitanism - the promotion of any supranational structure at all - was for a long long time a view held only by strange peeps indeed - visionaries and ranters and scifi writers - until it was suddenly in the works, laboured over by full secretariats with big bucks. Mazower puzzles over why the US and Britain put so much into these structures when the previous world order suited them fine. Answer? Camouflage, of

course.

4*/5.

- **Broken Angels** (2005) by Richard Morgan. Morgan has carved out a niche near to Mieville's scrimshaw métier: stylised, politically-literate hi-octane plotfests.

This one's less noir than war reportage. Kovacs - his broke-down hard-boiled super-soldier - is great, able to carry off the witty sociopathies of the action hero by virtue of involuntariness – the tropes having been brutally programmed into him. ‘Quell’, Morgan’s Marx-figure lurks larger here. There’s a bucket of great tech ideas, but they’re never the focus; the people scrambling in the wake of their machines are still recognisably human. Great names, too (a nuked town named “Sauberville”, a broker of mercenaries named “Semetaire”.) His many characters are vivid; his prose brash and stylish; his themes enormous, dark, and unmoping.

4/5.

- **Woken Furies** (2009) by Richard Morgan. And why not? This one errs on the splattery side: cybersplatterpunk. Nasty, entertaining look at revolution and market forces. Quotable too. On privatising and repressive currents: “This enemy you cannot kill. You can only drive it back damaged into the depths, and teach your children to watch the waves for its return”; on political pieties: “it’s amazing how constant repetition can make even the most obvious truths irritating enough to disagree with”. Morgan still manages to surprise – e.g. the fully sadistic episode involving the massacre and torture of misogynistic priests is hard to forget. The sea planet itself is the best of the new characters, weird and postmodern in layout, mechanics, oligarchy, mores. The last of the Kovacs novels – I’ll miss his nasty universe, with its fully fleshed-out cybersociety – its religions still boycotting technologies, its new types of decision (“which clone should I repay if their interests conflict?”) and crime; its remarriage customs when one spouse gets a new body... It holds up.

3*/5.

- ***The New Yorker, Feb 17th-24th*** (2014). My 1st hardcopy of this patent blend of self-obsessed candy-floss and hard-rock social conscience. Puffs include the Orientalist ballets of Manhattan, two dozen in-joke drawings of past New Yorker covers, and a pathetic quest for the best Buffalo wings in NY. Bright political banners include pieces on discriminatory voter legislation; Amazon.com as an unprecedented malign influence on the book world (and moreover the republic of letters); and Adam Gopnik's deft and equitable eye on the role of religion in today's secular places, atheisms past and the wishful futility of natural theology and 'reformed' epistemology. Anthony Lane's obit-filmography of Philip Seymour Hoffman is gushy, de trop, though I really liked him too. Final thought: We all live to some extent in a vicarious America; its pop and other muscular businesses have long ensured this. This magazine is shibboleth to America's other, real glory: their omnivorous collation and perfection of the world's ideas and arts. Even given the glory, it feels strange to submit voluntarily.

4/5.

- Reread aloud: ***Guards, Guards!*** (1991) by Terry Pratchett. Even better than I remember. Feudal-fantasy satire in the voice of pubs of C20th England, with dragons, wizards and pre-Peel police wheedling, appealing to genetics, sod's law, and an incongruous, dogged self-awareness. The prose is quieter (less self-referential and wilfully surreal) than his peers – Adams, Holt, Rankin – and reaches wisdom among levity. Discworld is his noble funhouse mirror of Britain. Pratchett is very good at technology fads, social class, the duality of human nature, and the excruciating embarrassment of romance. Everything a growing boy needs.

4/5.

- ***Fruit Gatherings*** (1916) by Rabindranath Tagore. Really wanted to like him – he's such an inspiration in the abstract. But it's unreconstructed Romanticism, based in cheap inversions ("the dignity of peasants! The worthlessness of wealth!") but also an odd deathly religiosity .

I liked #8:

*The desire of the bud is for the night and dew,
but the blown flower cries for the freedom of light.
Burst your sheath, my heart, and come forth!*

3/5.

MARCH 2014

- ***The Information*** (2010) by James Gleick. Ah! I am a sucker for this form in pop science: “primary research into some unjustly obscure x, pulling together the historical and scientific strands, revealing the excitement and transcendence in the unsexy, un-Arts thing, and making the reader feel smarter and more solidly located in the modern world for it”. Here X is information technology *very broadly construed* – so African talking drums, Morse, bioinformatics, memetics, Hawking radiation, Wiki, and so. I’d never heard of the hero of the tale, Claude Shannon, because he was quiet and didn’t make any metaphysical claims for his deeply scientific and metaphysical work. Loads and loads of tasty gobbets to boot

“I do not believe that my father was such a Poet as I shall be an Analyst (& Metaphysician)...” - Lovelace

“A theoretical physicist acts as a very clever coding algorithm.”

“Across the centuries they all felt the joy in reckoning: Napier and Briggs, Kepler and Babbage, making their lists, building their towers...”

Shot through with the joy of discovery, and all of it unbleached by the drudgery, familiarity, and commercialism evoked in “I.T.”.

4*/5.

- **OU TM129** (2013). How much less dystopian modern art would be if we only learned technology from the inside – the things we have built of tiny ons and offs!

- **OU M248** (2013).
2/5 & 5/5.
- ***Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity*** (2008) by Catherine Wilson. I'm a fan of Epicurus and Wilson both, so I was well-primed for this. (Check out her piece on Descartes, the bottom of p.87 on. Chutzpah out the wazoo.) She ranges over Epicurus' many vindications in the C17th with style and irreverence; Wilson's histories evaluate their subjects in current terms as well as just mumphing over their contemporaneous development:

Spinoza's tempering of his rejection of providence and his scorn for anthropomorphism and superstition with strong doses of Plato's theory of the transcendence of mundane reality account for the somewhat peculiar fascination this philosopher exercises over some readers.

This isn't unfair or anachronistic if you don't *blame* them for not getting it right - which means not praising Epicurus too much for guessing things in ways that accord with our world-view. Like every early-modern scholar I've ever taken the time to read, she's set on hailing the nervous Christian Epicurean Gassendi as the most overlooked pioneer in the philosophy of science. (At least the most overlooked outside of unsexy fields like agronomy or stats.) Nutritious, wry.

4/5.

- Reread aloud: ***Men at Arms*** (1994) by Terry Pratchett. S'ok. Identity politics and gun control – so, a very American British fantasy. Works: my audience squealed in horror at the right places, the deaths of fond characters.

3/5.

- ***We Owe You Nothing: Punk Planet Interviews*** (2001) ed. Daniel Sinker. Stunning sift of the best from a good institution; PP showed up the ideology in things but also, more importantly, the muddiness of the ideology in things; the genuinely thoughtful people here interviewed share a tendency to blur party lines. There are radicals talking radically in the usual manner (Chomsky, Biafra) but also practitioners (the Central Ohio Abortion Access Fund and the remarkable Voices in the Wilderness), iconoclasts of iconoclasm (Hanna, Mackaye) and even a few apolitical ethical-egoist libertines (Albini, Frank

Kozik) whose like are common in punk but rare in its commentary. Sinker's super-earnest intro text inserts all the right misgivings about Chumbawumba's entryism or Kozik's blithe first-generation patriotism, but he somehow retains his beautiful faith in 'Punk' (as empowering civil-disobedient grass-roots social justice) in the face of vast variation in actual punks.

My own attempt at the meaning of punk gave up on seeing it as one thing (or as good things) entirely. What are we to judge a social phenomenon by? Its majority expression? Its noblest exemplars? Its effects? (Which in punk's case, let's not flatter ourselves, were aesthetic rather than straightforwardly political: there is now slight freedom in clothing and hair colour in the workplaces of the land; there is now a standard pretence to deviance in all youth movements (e.g. pop music...) While Sinker's judgment is strong (cf. writing the oral history of Black Flag, with each member contradicting each other!), his prose gets seriously wearing. This is the real thing though: one type of inspirational young person in their own words.

4*/5.

- Reread aloud: *Feet of Clay* (1996) by TP. Another monarchist plot, another wonderful slice of Vimes. This instalment, one of his increasingly cinematic plots, pivots on the enduringly poignant trope of the Golem, the put-upon automata given life by holy words. Their persecution doesn't quite map to any one political issue, a point in favour really— they echo slavery, class struggle, and A.I. Pratchett also stretches to get a big bad pun into every scene, with mixed but gladdening results.

4/5.

- *New Yorker, March 10th (2014). Christ, Morsi is fucked.*

4/5. New Yorker, March 17th (2014). Christ, ITER is fucked.

4/5. New Yorker, March 24th (2014). Eeh. Didn't gel – there's an inexplicable 10 page piece on a pricey brand of sportswear, a celebration of fucking video art, a hollow paean to Scarlett Johansson from the usually urbane Anthony Lane, a nasty short story about being old in Liverpool. Bit on Paul de Man by Louis Menand is worth the admission though.

3/5.

- **Jingo** (1997) by Terry Pratchett. In a sentence: “War and diplomacy, race and nation: all stupid, but what you gonna do?”

3*/5.

- **The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World** (1982) by Lewis Hyde. A dreadful cover – until you see the testimonials from two badass novelists, DFW and Atwood. I spend a decent wedge of my time with art, but my ethics lead me to disparage artists (and anyone who picks lovely low-intensity bohemia) as shirking the demands of economic justice.

the landlord is not interested in your book of translations the day the rent falls due... every modern artist who has chosen to labor with a gift must wonder how he or she is to survive in a society dominated by market exchange. And if the fruits of a gift are gifts themselves, how is the artist to nourish himself, spiritually as well as materially, in an age whose values are market values?

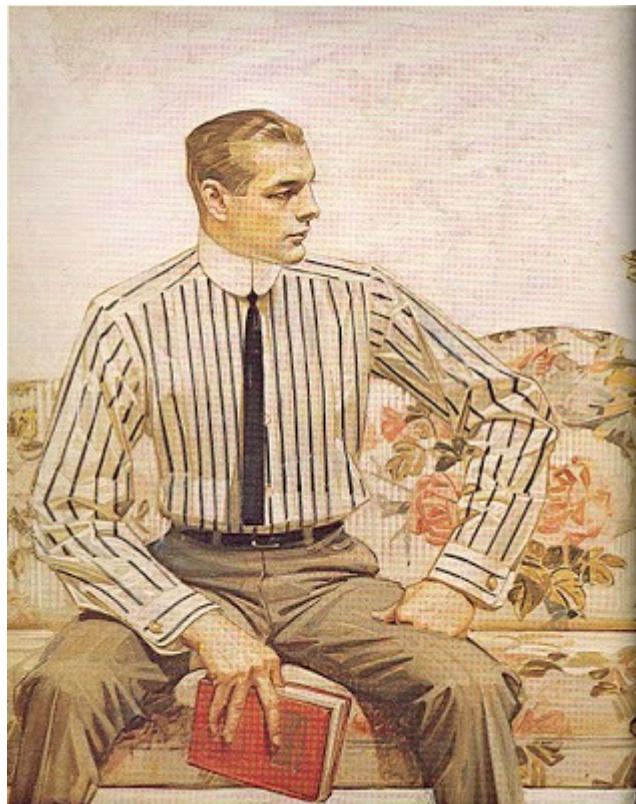
The gift anthropology he relies on has been called into question (but see Graeber for masterful synthesis of the contemporary reckoning) but it doesn't affect the core, angry, joyous point. Hyde is successful in showing my disparagement to be *sometimes* less valid, but the point is that few artworks are gifts to the world in this grand manner, so few are socially valuable alternatives to activism. (What about private value – the joy and casual divinity of spending your days indoors on your art? Well, that's different.)

4/5.

- **The Uses of Argument** (1958) by Stephen Toulmin. I had presumed that 'ordinary-language philosophy' must have had some highlights before becoming the dead scapegoat it now is, but I hadn't found any before this. (Does Ryle count?) This about logic and is yet gloriously not made of logic. Super-original still, full of things that the analysts at my university didn't know or didn't let on about (e.g. that the division between deductive and inductive reasoning is an extremely lazy partition obscuring four dichotomies; that the thing to watch out for in an argument is not really logical form but the field's own idiosyncracies).

Exciting, even – the primacy of the informal over the formal! First essay asks if there is anything in common between modes of justification (of propositions like “It won’t rain tomorrow”, “The defendant pleads Not Guilty”, “Kleist is shit.”, “Epicurus influenced Boyle more than any other philosopher”). Second is a strange and not wholly fruitful go at informal probability theory, but the third through fifth’s his application of his model to explain the good reasons that formal logic isn’t generally very good in real argument. (The bad reason being that people are ignorant of its force.) Panoptic, interdisciplinary without generalising; dry in a very good way. A reconfiguring book, and I haven’t really gotten the half of it yet.

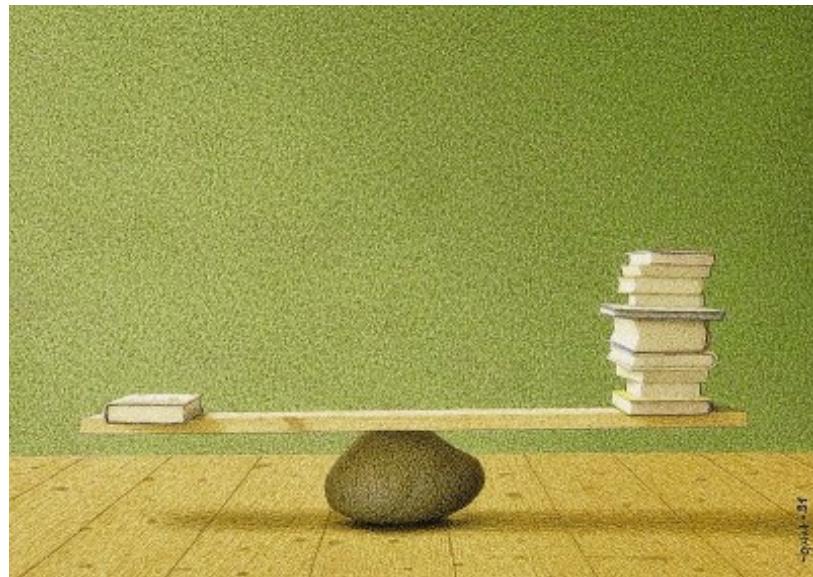
4*/5.



(more Leyendecker, c.1910)

*as long as one believes that the evil man wears horns, one will not discover
an evil man.*

- Erich Fromm



(c) "Bücherwaage" (1991) by Quint Buchholz

We feel an affinity with a certain thinker because we agree with him; or because he shows us what we were already thinking; or because he shows us in a more articulate form what we were already thinking; or because he shows us what we were on the point of thinking; or what we would have thought much later if we hadn't read it now; or what we would have been likely to think but never would have thought if we hadn't read it now; or what we would have liked to think but never would have thought if we hadn't read it now.

– Lydia Davis, jks

I lay under the mosquito net and thought white people were boobs. Africa has nothing to do with us and never will have... We are fools; we believe in words, not the reality which the words are supposed to describe. What has politics to do with real daily life, as real people live it?

– Martha Gellhorn (1949)

Why write down what you've been reading?

Well, there's the happy, crass braggadocio of it (*look upon my intake and despair*); in addition I imagine it improves my reading (since when you know you'll talk about something, you're forced to be critical); by scoring the greats I vent my vast stocks of *ressentiment*; it scratches a scrapbooking itch; a reading list is some defence against the disease cryptomnesia; when I mark something '5?' I suspect it's greater than one reading. My past becomes less spectral, my interpretations less unbridledly vapid, the

whole practice less vain. In the Biblical sense of vain, obviously.

A less self-obsessed reason to is that we are more or less accidentally biased against various sorts of people, and it's only with a method like this can one know oneself relevantly and do right by them.

APRIL 2014

- **Ban this Filth!: Letters from the Mary Whitehouse Archive** (2012) ed. Ben Thomson. Rather than dismissing her as *just* the archetypal religious-conservative idiot, how about treating her as a scared and thus angry lady who prefigured modern ambivalence about the extremes of our culture? OK, so it turns out paying attention doesn't make her less ridiculous, but she's certainly no longer alone: moral criticism of pop is an enormous cottage internet industry by now. Her small-mindedness put her, somehow, on the same lines as compassionate ideology does some of our contemporaries. (The ends meet in the middle Golden Hammer Marxism.) Thomson:

"From feminist anti-porn campaigns to UK Uncut, the Taliban, and Mumsnet, Mary Whitehouse's monuments are all around us."

Hrm: is she the reason people use complaint as a political tool? No! (Particularly not if you view protest as organised complaint. There *is* a distinction between complaint and protest - one is the expression of distaste, the other the ascription of injustice - but it's tricky for beasts like us to tell them strictly apart.) Was she the prototype? Yeah, OK.

2/5.

- **Saturn's Children** (2008) by Charles Stross. Morbid, playful. Robots, emancipated by our death, fall into slaving each other. Stross' science makes it: he defamiliarises ordinary human conditions (e.g. water is just another arbitrary compound to them, and the emphasis on, well, time that fiction about humans finds it hard to do without is off), he focusses on the many many vagaries of spaceflight ("The dirty truth is that space travel is shit..."), and offers a harsh, clean sociology ("Architecture and economics are the unacknowledged products of planetography.")... Prose is hard to describe: there's definitely an Adams

twinkle in there, but it's buried beneath hard science, sexual complexity and glib lifts ("that corner of me which is forever Juliette"). His society's accidental oligarchy is dissatisfying; the plot's repetitive and disintegrates towards the end. Still cool, obtrusive.

3*/5. [Library]

- **New Yorker April 7th** (2014). I expect to be equipped by this magazine, prepared for present trends and shibboleths and jargon, and this week certainly did. Some vital vocabulary for negotiating modern culture: Emily Nussbaum's term 'bad fans' (people who identify with the nihilist protagonists of complex dramas, e.g. Tony Soprano, Walter White, sort-of Don Draper); the 'creative bumbling' of a veteran journalist (i.e. using stupidity as an elicitation technique). Then there's Jonathan Lethem's touching piece about a man guilty about his meat-eating; it includes a daydream that I myself dreamed on long childhood car journeys (you imagine that your eyes are a huge great knife cutting away everything taller than you as you pass by, in the back seat. I wonder if it's in the DSM? 'Juvenile Vehicular Megalopsychosis').

4/5.

- Reread aloud: **The Fifth Elephant** (1999) by Terry Pratchett. About oil, conservatism, the Inscrutable Balkans. The most literary of his excellent police books: telecomms as model and amplifier of emotional and cultural ties; contact with otherness as cause and defining feature of modernity. Less grandiosely, he trots out his satisfying werewolf point again: in actual fact, the creature that lies halfway between human and wolf is not a terrifying lunatic chimera but a dog.

4/5.

- **Travels with Myself and Another** (1978) by Martha Gellhorn. Hilarious, patrician, blunt account of the worst of her many journeys, to: Guomindang China 1941, the U-boated Caribbean 1942, East through West Africa 1949, liberal Russia 1966, hippie Israel 1971. Her uncompromising generalisations about the people she meets skirt racialism, particularly in the long Africa chapter

(e.g. she categorises each new tribe by average attractiveness and prevailing smell; she calls ‘racial’ what we’d deem cultural traits; like many vets, she insists on using the word ‘Jap’). But her discrimination is as in ‘discriminating’: making just distinctions. She’s fair, keen to empathise -

“I said it stood to reason that we must smell in some disgusting way to them. Yes, said Aya, they say we have the ‘stale odour of corpses’; they find it sickening. This cheers me; fair’s fair; I don’t feel so mean-minded”

– a point you can find in p’Bitek, among others) and holds colonialists and bigots in far higher contempt (“it seems conceited to foist off our notions of religion, which we have never truly practised, onto people whose savagery is much more disorganised, personal and small-scale than ours”). My mate Paul – a noted cynic – believes, along with most of our generation, that travel is ennobling, inherently. It surely is not, but it certainly does put an edge on some folks’ writing. (Not their souls:

“One needs Equanil here too, not just in our white urban civilisation; tranquilisers against impatience, against the hysteria induced by heat, and the disgust at dirt”...

) Generous, stylish, and a fine if not superior substitute for going these places.

4*/5.

- ***A Paradox of Ethical Vegetarianism*** (2000) by Kathryn Paxton George. Original, empirical, principled, and wrong. “Saying people can’t hurt and eat animals is sexist”. Appreciative dismissal forthcoming.

3*/5.

- ***Holy Shit: A Brief History of Swearing*** (2013) by Melissa Mohr. Cool blast through three-and-a-bit millennia of talking Christ’s bowels and fucking shit. She distinguishes between ‘obscenities’ and ‘oaths’ (the first takes profane subjects, the second, sacred) and then between the proper and the vain oath (e.g. “Bejasus! Godammit! Hell’s teeth!”). Adding the generalisation that ‘we swear about what we care about’, she can use known changes in the expressive power

of swearwords to cleverly trace the movement of taboos across cultures and over time. (Very broadly: power went from Shit's precedence to Holy and now back and with more political terms.)

Rome's nasty little sexuality is seen to be the model of a lot of our crap associations; in the Middle Ages vain oaths were criminal while scholars and physicians used 'cunt' in textbooks without heat. In our time, racial slurs (very young as slurs – only WWII for real malevolence) have taken the biscuit from sex, excrement and God - which you can see as encouraging (if that means we now care about the targets of racial language) - or depressing (if that means we now care more about Race, dividing lines for their own sake). Mohr is full of fact without being trivial; and she lets graffiti, court records, and primary quotation damn the damnable – e.g. DH Lawrence's holy cock-mysticism, the spume of Twitter bigots.

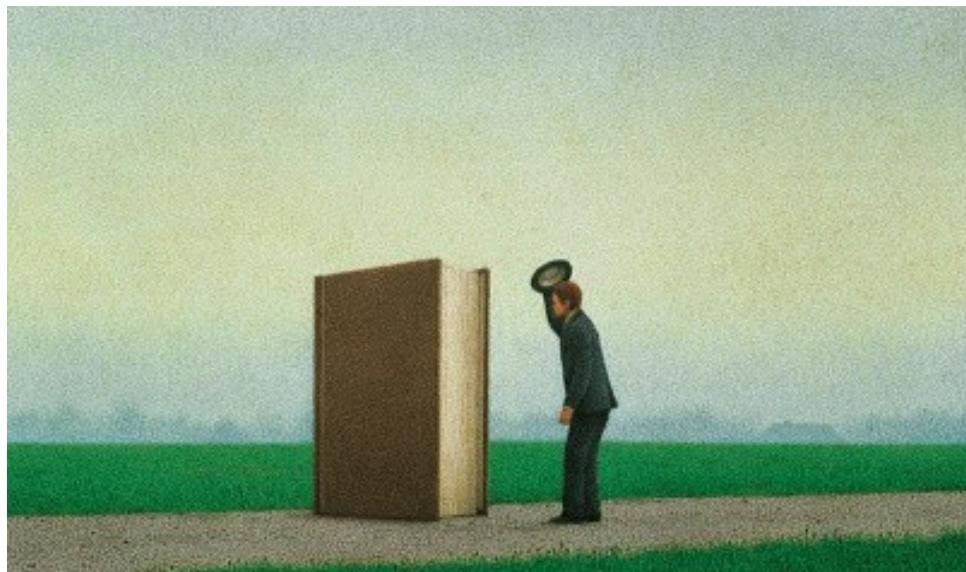
4/5. [Library]

- **Samuel Johnson is Indignant** (2001) by Lydia Davis. Went on guard when I heard that the title story's one sentence long – speaking, as such conceits do, of the holy-urinal sort of superstitious art – but this is standout, a series of droll, exacting capsules and nutshells. A typical piece is one page long and part gag, part compulsive meditation, part confession of petty vice. Once you get over her diffident, terse non-being, it is fun stuff. The long piece on jury duty is best, its length and repetitious babble a symmetry of the trial.

4*/5.

- Read aloud: **Night Watch** (2004) by Terry Pratchett. Perhaps his darkest book (though he never was just about puns and japes – consider the extent of extinction and futility in Strata). All about the Night, as in inherent human brutality and in being metaphysically lost. Remarkable for being about being the police in a police state. Cried my eyes out at the climax the first time, a decade ago.

3*/5.



"Der Gruss (1990) by Quint Buchholz

MAY 2014

- ***Between Faith and Doubt: Dialogues on Religion and Reason*** (2010) by John Hick. Why would anyone want to take away someone else's sense of the ultimate goodness and unity of things – want, that is, to be a New sort of atheist? Well, you might have misread history so that religious identity looms as the main cause of violence. Or you might note their continuing key role in keeping heinous patriarchal shit on the go (but this reasoning misses the long tradition of smuggling real progress in through churches). Better, you might view the act of worship as in fact degrading to the worshipper, or see the epistemology implicit in religious practice as an unhealthy stance to take to the world. (Preventing as it does healing doubt and honest, energetic inquiry; outmoded as it is given better methods at hand.) Anyway: Hick of the rearguard talks fairly and at length with a fictional scientific interlocutor, demonstrating how, if the theist is willing to retreat ad hoc about ten times, scientism actually cannot touch them. Amusing example: Hick responds to the solid neurological explanation of religious experience by saying that this is all perfectly consistent with electrical induction in the right angular gyrus just *enabling us to perceive the spiritual world*. I adore bullet-biting of this magnitude. Hick ends this mostly fair tourney still “as certain as it is possible to be” about God, despite only having parried the critical arguments at great metaphysical cost. At least his atheist doesn’t convert at the end.

3/5. [Library]

- ***Black Man*** (2012) by Richard Morgan. Another geno-soldiers-get-invented-banned-and-what-then chin-scratcher. Nearer us in time and space than his Kovacs novels (this isn't interstellar) – but they've still all forgotten us, bar the historians. Morgan lets genetic determinism run away with the plot: everyone's always explaining themselves with reference to their or others' "wiring". At one point the protagonist hears a similarity in two people's diction and "wondered idly what genes the two men might share". Also his theme, 'GM humans as future Other' gets ponderous inbetween the ultraviolence. But Morgan is always worthwhile: his books suspend the ideological alongside the unhappily sexual alongside big strange guns (e.g. an AIDS pistol, loaded with GM virus 'Falwell'). More mature in some ways – there's a feminist imam, and a religious character he doesn't have violent contempt for – but also a bit busy and contralto.

3*/5. [Library]

Stross and Morgan refer to 'black labs' a lot – that is, dastardly underground geneticists. Every single time they did, I wondered what the authors had against Labradors. Sort it out.

- ***The Adoption Papers*** (1991) by Jackie Kay. Strong, po-faced verse portrait of her own birth and adoption, in three voices. Really lovely details throughout – her mother hiding all her Communist décor for first meeting the birth mother; Kay kissing her poster of Angela Davis goodnight, a traumatic, funny dismissal of the idea that your real mother has to be your birth mother

(“*After mammy telt me she wisna my real mammy
I wis scared to death she wis gonna melt...*”).

Meeting her bio-mum much later, Kay's disillusionment is subtly and truly done: "the blood does not bind confusion" (mop it up, like carbon dioxide). It becomes apparent that Kay has just created the birth mother character – her mouth filled with vivid Plathian violence and articulate confusion not born out by the real woman. If so, more the better. See also 'I try my absolute best', a perfect snapshot of C20th hippy despair at agrichemicals.

4/5. [Library]

- ***The Great Infidel: The Life of David Hume*** (2004) by Roderick Graham.
 Gossipy. Says at the start that he isn't aiming at Hume's thought or worldview – just his personality, context, happenstance – but since Hume spent a big chunk of his adult life alone thinking, this is quixotic, and Graham predictably does have to go into the Treatise and Essays and Dialogues (and to be frank he does so badly, uncritically). This is filled instead with all the bad reviews Hume got, and the clubs he got into, and the middlebrows that quarrelled with him rather than his eternal legacies, i.e. judgment under uncertainty, reason's motivational inertia, cognitive naturalism, the frailty of natural theology, the kernel of all these ideas. The bit on Rousseau as incredible drama queen is good – here is R's reaction to Hume looking at him:

where, great God! did this good man borrow those eyes he fixes so sternly and unaccountably on his friends! My trouble increased even to a degree of fainting; and had I not been relieved by an effusion of tears, I'd been suffocated... in a transport, which I still remember with delight, I sprang on his neck, embraced him eagerly while almost choked with sobbing...

Graham is super-fond of the C18th's loud intellectual tribalism, but it's not enough.

2/5. [Library]

- ***Anselm*** (2009) by Visser and Williams. An Analyst metaphysician and a Catholic Medievalist walk into a bar... V&W manage to make light of a thousand years' semantic drift and logical innovations; so their Anselm turns out to be an ingenious and honest rationalist wrestling with the many millstones of Christian lore. (e.g. Making original sin's indiscriminate infinite hellfire seem just, making the Trinity seem unavoidable rather than a fundamental logical error enforced by terror.) Anselm's work is a testament to the cornucopiaic potential of motivated reasoning – a.k.a philosophy, in its middle millennium. A testament to something.

3/5.

- Read aloud: *Pyramids* (1991), *The Truth* (2005), *Unseen Academicals* (2009), *Thud!* (2008), and *Snuff* (2012) by Terry Pratchett. The Disc grows modern, here gaining a media, sanitation, a soft-power politics, and institutionalised sport, to add to its latter-day civilian police, telecoms, and steam power. The key, most literary thing about the Discworld books is this modernisation, from magic to steampunk. (This happens comically rapidly – Colour of Magic, the first book, is standard non-chronistic High Fantasy, so, set circa circa 1200CE. Snuff takes place not twenty discursive years later – yet the central city is clearly Victorian. And that's not including the burgeoning intercontinental fax network.)

Technology is given its due, but the institutional side isn't neglected. Modernity began with the despot Vetinari's marketisation of crime, moves through ethnic diversity reforms and open-door immigration, and marches on and on. UA, the sport one, is solid, poignant. He doesn't often let his wizards get earnest and truly develop – by this stage, magic is comic relief, no longer the determining power or symbol of the Disc. It just remains to be seen if democracy and international organisation settle in. Snuff is dark and politically worthy, but not his best. He's been reusing jokes in recent books, and I refuse to speculate on the cause. The series is

4*/5. [Library]

- *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012) by Iain M Banks. His last utopian statement. Tame by the histrionic standards of space opera and his own usual plot webs – though there are the usual infuriating Machiavellis and convincing dilemmas. Grim implications about immortality, decadence, international relations. Worth reading all of the Culture books for the discussions between AIs.

3/5. [Library]

- *Mao's Great Famine* (2010) by Frank Dikötter. Deadpan documentation of the most awe-inspiring and culpable misrule ever. (I don't mean to weigh Mao's 40 million counts of negligent manslaughter and 5m conspiracies-to-murder against e.g. the 12 millions of more intentional monsters; the exercise seems childish, past some asymptote of human suffering.) The Party took their land and animals, melted their pans and hoes, killed billions of birds and 40% of the trees in China,

starved them until they sold their children, and them starved them some more. At the same time they exported 30 million tons of grain, mostly for guns. Historians are impressive for their readiness to sift through so much irrelevant tonnage – and so much that is boring even when relevant – just so as to be careful and good. Mao comes across as a self-deceiving sociopath; Zhou as a decent man nevertheless allowing atrocities. Heavier than The Black Book, than Primo Levi.

4/5. [Library]

- **Chuck Klosterman on Media and Culture** (2009) by CK. Extraordinary raid on modern tyrannies. Of: contemporary sexuality, cereal adverts, the implications of the 00s pirate craze, questions in general, the Unabomber's good point. Klosterman's not going to get away without comparison to DFW – but he's really good in his own way too. He's a more relaxed, atheoretical Wallace, with pop music (rather than Art writing) at his core, and technology (rather than general Irony) as the source of his worries about us all. This slices through the reflexivity that causes modern confusions, while being mischievously reflexive himself (at one point he tells us that he once lied to an interviewer who had correctly identified Klosterman's mouthpiece in one of his novels; Klosterman denied that he shared the character's view in order to preserve a cheap narrative uncertainty for readers of the interview – but, of course, admitting that here undoes that cheap save for we third-order readers). Applied instance:

"We assume that commercials are not just informing us about purchasable products, because that would be crude and ineffective. We're smarter than that. But that understanding makes us more vulnerable. We've become the ideal audience for advertising—consumers who intellectually magnify commercials in order to make them more trenchant and clever than they actually are. Our fluency with the language and motives of the advertiser induces us to create new, better meanings for whatever they show us. We do most of the work for them."

Two quibbles: there is (what I take to be) a lack of ideological care (that, I take it, is what) you'd expect of pieces written for *Esquire* magazine. But he transcends it. He doesn't resolve (as I think DFW mostly does) the tension between a) affirming low culture's power and unique charms against bullshit classist disparagement, and b) despising its crudest, most conservative common denominators. Went through it in an hour, but the best hour of the year.

4*/5.

- ***The Almost Totally Perfect People: The Nordic Miracle Examined*** (2014) by Michael Booth. Fault-finding things received opinion finds no fault with?: good. Booth's says the weather, the expense, the pressurised homogeneity of ethnicity and manner leading to marginalisation, the hypocrisy (e.g. Statoil's tar sands), and the diet are the only subtractions. The bit on their peerless state education (for decades Finnish kids have scored the highest on tests with the lowest inequality – but the kids' own satisfaction with the system is the lowest on record) is good, basing the whole Miracle on their school system: "It is no coincidence that the region that is consistently judged to have the highest levels of wellbeing, also has the greatest equality of educational opportunity... To achieve authentic, sustained happiness, above all else you need power over your own life..." How to recreate this, everywhere? He concludes that it's a difficult-to-copy feedback loop from 1) actually respecting teachers and funding everyone's Master's, so 2) attracting excellent people, who 3) teach excellently and thus 1) earn the respect of their charges and society... Booth can be a bit glib ("Is it still racist if they're rich?"), and is obsessed with tax to the point where he has to ask five different professors how on earth people don't simply die from 50% income tax. But he gets into the cracks and his wonder and affection rise up afterward: "please don't [form a separate Nordic Union]. Truly the rest of us would not stand a chance."

3/5. [Library]

- ***The Ancestor's Tale*** (2004) by Richard Dawkins. He's good when he sticks to his damn field! Loads of lovely examples and vivid analogies. The sidebar that naturalises human races is surprisingly careful and illuminating - that *portion* of the phenomenon that's genetic is more straightforward than I'd thought, in my Arts student way. (Though his placid definitiveness on the social interpretation is obvs controversial as hell. He's an unqualified eliminativist, implying that the harm resulting from reifying race totally outweighs all gains from positive discrimination, which can't be right.) I hadn't heard of the 'two-fold cost' of sex before, super-interesting. Not as snarky as you'd expect, and full of alternative perspectives so long as they're evolutionists' perspectives.

4/5.

- **New Selected Poems 1984-2004** (2004) by Carol Ann Duffy. A world in a tone. I'd thought of her as sort of obvious – all first-order, meaning near the surface and all on worthy themes like childhood perversity and elderly loss. But her best ("Auden's Alphabet", "Shooting Stars") unfold, see her wielding that obviousness and having fun with drudgery. More historical pieces than I expected, too. Impression: 'dissolving into childhood', life as school forever, if school is undemonstrative alienation and uninteresting torment. The epic autiobio documentary "Laughter of Stafford Girls' School" is dead good; the key to it is that after the anti-authoritarian lark, the poem follows home the prim teachers who failed to control the ruckus, and imagines their own repression give way a touch; plus half a point.

4/5. [Library]

JUNE 2014

- **Intention** (1957) by Elizabeth Anscombe. Christ: difficult. Very brief, very ordinary, and yet unsettling. Her language looks very clear – it's jargon-free – but on engaging with it you'll see that it's blurred, terse, arduous. She never introduces the question at hand, or have any introduction at all: on page 1 she just sets about the concept with that sort of Wittgensteinian observational-tragedy monologue. Anyway I think it's about the problem of intention ('what answers 'why?', and why?' Or: 'how can teleology be explained in terms of brute causation (science)?'). I think her central points are that: intentions are justified with reasons, not evidence; intentional explanation is not at all causal explanation; so intentional action is not amenable to a naturalist reduction (because to explain an action with reasons is precisely to not explain it with laws of nature); that intention is not a mental state but a process involving (?); that we have synthetic, non-observational, non-inferential knowledge of the world; that we have this simply because we know about our bodies and intentions. (OK, that needs filling-in to make it less misrepresentative: 1) if you don't know that you are doing something, you're not doing it intentionally; 2) if it's only during, or after the fact that you infer you're doing something, you can't be doing it for

reasons. So, if you are doing something intentional, you necessarily know you are doing it, and she thinks this knowledge isn't based on observing oneself or post-hoc theorising. *Intention* was meant to be the first piece in the first 'proper', psychologised account of agency. (She thought one needed an action theory before one could have a real moral theory. But I think consequentialism sidesteps that need, just as it ducks the free-will responsibility question, and the warm-glow problem, and the meta-ethical status of moral language... But of course for humans the key need, the one consequentialism can never avoid, is people's need for bullshit intuitions about their own importance and uniqueness.)

?/5. [Library]

- **Karl Marx** (2003) by Francis Wheen. Portrait of Karl Jeremiah Wooster Cosby Marx. Wheen's an ideal biographer: fearless, careful, eventually sympathetic. (So, ideal for the readers rather than the subject.) Most of his shortish book is debunking slanders; the rest is in cementing others. Was Marx a bully? No: bullies take weak targets. A dogmatist? No; spent twenty years researching one-quarter of his big book, and admired his bourgeois forebears Ricardo and Feuerbach. Was he a Whig 'historian'? Sort of. Petty? Oh yes indeedy. A hypocrite idealist? Tried not to be. Anti-semitic? Yes, or, used the language. Russophobe? Definitely somewhat. Bourgeois patriarch? Very much so. A heartless philanderer? Once. A show-off? Yup. I came up with an epitaph for him – "KM. Excellent journalist, journeyman economist, awful leader." but I am not learned enough to assert it yet. Wheen is in a rush (Hegel's system gets five lines) but he writes fantastically, has read everything and understood a great deal more than e.g. me.

4/5. [Library]

- **The Living End: The Future of Death, Aging and Immortality** (2008) by Guy Brown. Cambridge neuroscientist lets himself go, speculating a bit aimlessly on the meaning and ends of present trends. He goes via Gilgamesh, Swift and Woolf as much as HeLa, Hayflick and Kirkwood. Core evidence-based conclusions are: Life expectancy increases are not slowing down much; dementia is exploding upwards; we know very little about aging and have almost no power over it (but a start has been made – e.g. we know inflammation is important if not the core –

and). The core attitudinal point is to view aging as a disease and death an injustice. Cute (“build a dream, write that novel... have lots of sex”), and it comes from a position of strength, but not so deep. I recommend instead Nick Bostrom (as kaleidoscopic booster), Bryan Appleyard (as somewhat sympathetic sceptic) and Michael Sandel and Habermas (as non-contemptible bioconservatives).

3/5.

- ***On Western Terrorism: From Hiroshima to Drone Warfare*** (2013) by Noam Chomsky and Andre Vltchek. Echo-chamber dialogue about our barely recognised crimes against humanity. I have mixed feelings about Chomsky, beautiful fist of a man that he is. For half a century he hasn't stopped talking about unbelievable global crimes that went unreported at the time, and are now unremembered, let alone punished. But. Full discussion here.

Even given their slips and general exaggeration, there's no way around some evidence-based conclusions: we are not in general a positive force in the world (almost no-one with power is); this is not well-known; as long as the US is legally immune from prosecution, international justice is a joke; we have very often given money and guns to the worst people in the world; we did this for money and control.

3/5* [Library]

* Only to be skimmed if you *already* know about about Leopold II, Britain in Palestine, Operation Boot, Operation PBFORTUNE, Lumumba, the Plain of Jars, Pinochet, Noriega and Just Cause, Suharto, El Salvador, and that Iraq matter. If you don't, this is 4/5 if taken alongside Dikotter and Kolakowski.

- ***On the Pleasure of Hating*** (1818ish) by William Hazlitt. Toty brace of magazine pieces in which he philosophises bare-knuckle fights, juggling, and yes petty hatred. He's cute, what with his italicised phrases that are now clichés (“blue ruin”), his enthusiasm for enthusiasm, his mid-sentence verse quotations, his Latinate insults (“O procul, este profani”), and enthusiastic woe. is reaction to seeing someone juggle four balls at once:

It makes me ashamed of myself. I ask what there is I can do as well as this? Nothing. What have I been doing all my life? ... What abortions are these Essays! How little is made out, and that little how ill! Yet they are the best I can do.

The essay that's from is about juggling and the concept Greatness and the character of a dear dead sportsman friend – and all this in 20 pages. Big man, only sometimes clotted in the seven-clause sentences of his age.

4/5.

- **Stories, Volume 1** (1884ish) by Anton Chekhov. Was expecting these to be very severe, but, though it has more than its share of erroneous suicides and fist-shaking dread, his tack is usually to laugh at the cold.

?/5

- **Most of Gwern.net** (2008-2014) by Gwern Branwen. Fantastic freelance research into the technical and the existential, with practical recommendations aplenty. (For instance, I abuse melatonin after reading his argument, plus prudent second- and third- opinions which lack the key risk/reward reasoning.) I have never seen cost:benefit reasoning this inclusive and persuasive. His breadth, depth are plain, so I'll just link some important ones: on effective altruism, mathematical psychology and metamathematical risk, abortion, analysing the analysts, sceptical self-experimentation. I skipped the animé essays – but in light of his detailed, affirmative sociology of subcultures, they make perfect sense, probably even strictly (that is, as expected value).

4*/5.

...I choose the opposite. Instead of confronting reality and embracing the Experience of Being Alive, I will sit here and read about Animal Collective over the Internet. Again. I will read about Animal Collective again. And not because the content is important or amusing or well written, but because the content exists. Reading about Animal Collective has replaced being alive. I aspire to think of myself as an analog person, but I am not. I have been converted to digital without the remastering, and the fidelity is appalling.

- Chuck Klosterman

HOW TO AVOID READING SOME OF THIS BOOK

Ideally, you should use a computer to help you avoid reading some of this book and read the rest more effectively. The models

The basic tenet of multiculturalism is that people need to stop judging each other—to stop asserting (and, eventually, to stop believing) that this is right and that is wrong, this true and that false, one thing ugly and another thing beautiful... The problem is that once you have done away with the ability to make judgments as to right and wrong, true and false, etc., there's no real culture left. All that remains is clog dancing and macramé. The ability to make judgments, to believe things, is the entire point of having a culture. I think this is why guys with machine guns sometimes pop up in places like Luxor and begin pumping bullets into Westerners.

- Neal Stephenson

to say that love is what motivates most of us who are neither complete bastards nor distracted by secondary concerns such as “what other people will think” – to say this is not to say anything very neat or tidy. But that too is as it should be.

- the Unknown Anti-Ethicist

Why not write down what you've been reading?

Well, it's pompous. It also adds a loud implicit audience - yourself - who gawks over your shoulder and interrupts to say what they fucking think. (Fiction benefits from leaving behind such gremlins as your tutors and yourself.) There's also some pressure to rush the reading and keep up with yourself. Also, forcing out reviews of things is a recipe for banality and witless caution (see any newspaper with a small review staff). And, of course, time spent writing is time not reading.

JULY 2014

- **Niubi!: The Real Chinese You Were Never Taught in School** (2009) by Eveline Chao. Actually I was - but only because my laoshi was a saucy linguistics grad who warned me not to practice the tricky phoneme 日 or 入 on the street, or ever to shout “3-8!”. Anyway this is dead funny and valuable for understanding the place’s otherwise inaccessible working-class or web or queer registers – and as a way of generally not seeming like a prig. So: language is fossilised sociology; Chao excavates what would take us decades. She begins with slurs of all sorts, but doesn’t list any homophobia – claiming it isn’t a well-rooted hatred there (...).

There's loads and loads of ableism, though. Gets more serious as it goes, with whole chapters on gay culture and web ‘activism’ (恶搞 is ‘evildoings’, lulz). This turns up details like the infallibly hilarious “potato queen”. I also loved her decoding the ancient innuendoes: 云雨 (clouds and rain), 鱼水之欢 (the fish and the water, happy together), 余桃 (sharing peaches), or “playing the bamboo flute” or “bamboo harmonica”. (BTW, the title term is 牛屁 – ‘Cow-cunt’ – and means “Awesome!”.)

4/5 for subcultures.

- **Capital in the 21st Century** (2014) by Thomas Piketty. Well then! Long separate blog review in the works. Was swooning by the end of the preface

To put it bluntly, the discipline of economics has yet to get over its childish passion for mathematics and for purely theoretical and often highly ideological speculation, at the expense of historical research and collaboration with the other social sciences. Economists are all too often preoccupied with petty mathematical problems of interest only to themselves. This obsession with mathematics is an easy way of acquiring the appearance of scientificity without having to answer the far more complex questions posed by the world we live in. There is one great advantage of being an academic economist in France: here, economists are not highly respected in the academic and intellectual world or by political and financial elites. Hence they must set aside their contempt for other disciplines and their absurd claim to greater scientific legitimacy, despite the fact that they know almost nothing about anything.

He's understandably keen to emphasise his ideological hygiene - but, as the Tory media correctly noted, the act of paying attention to inequality is itself a weakly left-wing act. With a few more diagrams and boxed definitions, this would make an excellent intro macro textbook, gentle and empirically obsessive as it is. Policy chapter is superb an' all.

Weighed down only by (forgiveable) overstatement of its own achievement ("the fundamental laws of capitalism"). Lot of redundancy - whoa-there steady-now summary paragraphs every few pages - but I suppose that's what you need to do if you aim to be understood by policymakers.

4*/5. [Library]

- ***Deaf Sentence*** (2008) by David Lodge. Gentle, silly-solemn, but limp campus novel. Examines middle-class middle-age without angst, despite the narrator's being very hard of hearing. There's a sudden tokenistic Auschwitz section which gets about one page of build-up and is soon left behind (when the actual plot revives itself). Its affairs are less farcical, ambitions less contemptible, plot less unabashedly neat (though there is this: "Perhaps one day we'll turn up in a campus novel" – "God, I hope not"), and I miss all that of Lodge.

3/5. [In one sitting]

- ***Even As We Speak: Essays 1993-2001*** (2002) by Clive James. The last twenty years see James taking his dark intellectual turn to the history of totalitarianism, and bringing it into everything, everything else, dragging Hitler and Stalin around like the stations of the cross. His long excoriation of Daniel Goldhagen is angry, entertaining, and an education in itself. (The question the two men are at odds over is, "How could civilised, literate, assimilative Germany Do Such Things?" Goldhagen says: because they – all Germans – were eliminationists just itching for an excuse. James' answer is complex, but puts due weight on the simplest explanation: they did it because a single word of dissent meant death, for any of them.) James is a bit obsessed by his chosen field tbh – Hitler references turn up in his sunny, giddy Sydney Olympics pieces! Then there's his ornately maudlin account of his acquaintance with Diana Spenser.

(I spent a little while trying to pigeonhole his politics recently – this non-

republican, anti-Marxist, pro-American-culture hobnobber – and decided it is wrong to call him right-wing. “Democracy is really valuable only for what it prevents...”) Funny, profound in places, but his late themes had solidified already and are covered better in *A Point of View* and *Cultural Amnesia*.

3*/5. [Library]

- ***The Rhesus Chart*** (2014) by Charles Stross. Brave, for a writer of taste to write a vampire book, these days. But then in a sense Stross doesn’t give a shit, since he has written a vampire book in which the vampires are literally high-frequency investment bankers who become vampires literally because of high-frequency investment banking. Then there’s his occult computer science (“Magic is a side-effect of certain classes of mathematics... Sensible magicians use computers.”).

Stross is the only writer I know who depicts the corporate/bureaucratic way of life properly, as well as just its deadening language. Millions of people now spend much of their lives within a structure encouraging this mindset; we need art that knows its vagaries and petty circumlocutions and administrivia. So, extra half-point for detailed solidarity with the office drone. And the TVTropes reference.

3/5. [Library]

- Reread: ***Collected Poems*** (1988) by Philip Larkin. Of the consuming fear of death, sexual frustration, impostor syndrome: Britain. (In fact this is the apotheosis of male British misery: Housman, if he was honest about his appetites; Lawrence with a sense of humour; Auden plus even more jazz.) He was forever overawed by lack of control over his life; we are left with his superlative control of form. Motifs are well-known: the hostile wind heard from the cold attic; the diminishing of strength; the fall of desire - without a matching fall in the desire to desire; the conviction that age is not running out of time, but running out of self. These are not moans: he loves jazz and booze and other things that make death recede. He’s vulgar, but never as a punchline; what starts with “Groping back to bed after a piss” will end with the universe:

*The hardness and the brightness and plain
far-reaching singleness of that wide stare
Is a reminder of the strength and the pain
Of being young; that it can't come again,
But is for others undiminished somewhere.*

There's too much in this volume. I mean that as criticism of its editor, not as expression of Larkin's o'erflowing sublimity. But that too, actually: "Sad Steps", "Aubade", "For Sidney Bechet", "No Road", and "Continuing to Live" are among my favourites. By '72 his bitterness and fear had overcome his basic kindness, and he dried up, leaving doggerel for mates and nasty biz like "The Old Fools" or "The Card Players". And yet even after three years of this came "Aubade". I avoided the juvenilia, perhaps even out of superstitious respect.

5/5.

AUGUST 2014

- ***The Good Women of China*** (2002) by Xinran. Ripping, horrible portrait of patriarchal suffering – but undermined by the editing process; the narrative she ties the various cases of abuse, suppression and loss is too neat for my jaded nonfiction hopper. She may have just had a very cinematic few years as the most famous woman in the country, bearing witness, but the coincidences make it difficult to take it too seriously. I don't actually doubt that the interviews happened, nor that she received the aggregate worry and misery for millions; so I'm not sure which part I'm taking issue with. The unnatural dovetail. China comes across here as a little village where Xinran was wise mother, and all distant rumours burst into her life.

(Maybe my reaction is just a cheap defence mechanism against the thought of an 11 year old repeatedly giving themselves pneumonia to avoid their rapist father and other such tales of ordinary madness.)

Nothing in the text matches the simple implicit horror of the hanzi on the cover: "nu" (female), nu+er (female + housework = woman), hao (female + son = good, The Good). Even granting that it is much easier to see oppression in cultures

other than your own...

3/5.

- ***In the Beginning was the Command Line*** (1999) by Neal Stephenson. Classic, cynical cultural history of popular computing. Also a noob-friendly guide to breaking free. (As such it's a love letter to GNU: "Linux... are making tanks... Anyone who wants can simply climb into one and drive it away for free... It is the fate of manufactured goods to slowly and gently depreciate as they get old and have to compete against more modern products. But it is the fate of operating systems to become free.") If you're like me (human?), you need metaphors and binary distinctions to get abstract stuff, and Stephenson has them coming out of his ears, which sometimes leads to stone-tablet patronising tone*.

Disney and Apple/Microsoft are in the same business: short-circuiting laborious, explicit verbal communication with expensively designed interfaces.")

An amazing writer, though: he finds program comments "like the terse mutterings of pilots wrestling with the controls of damaged airplanes." In tech, 15 years is a full geological era and a half*, so some of his insights have taken on a sepia hue (e.g. "Apple are doomed because they are obsessed with hardware"). But astonishingly, most have not – and how many other tech articles from the 90s are still worth a single minute of your time?

4/5 for noobs like me.

* He uses this very metaphor in this short essay.

- ***Bright-sided: How Positive Thinking Fooled the World*** (2009) by Barbara Ehrenreich. Sharp, sharp! Blames the grinning tendency in its many forms – the New Age mystic sort, the New Age pseudoscience sort, the self-help, motivational, pink ribbon, megachurch, and positive psychology forms – for much suffering and tastelessness, including the whole 2008 financial crisis. And she writes with sardonic muscle:

I felt at that moment, and for the first time in this friendly crowd, absolutely alone. If science is something you can accept or reject on the

basis of personal taste, then what kind of reality did she and I share?... To base a belief or worldview on science is to reach out to the nonbelievers and the uninitiated, to say that they too can come to the same conclusions if they make the same systematic observations and inferences. The alternative is to base one's worldview on revelation or mystical insight, and these things cannot be reliably shared with others. So there's something deeply sociable about science; it rests entirely on observations that can be shared with and repeated by others... It is a glorious universe the positive thinkers have come up with, a vast, shimmering aurora borealis... It's just a god-awful lonely place.

Was a bit disturbed by her personal impressions of the legit psychologists (Seligman's profiteering and evasiveness, the apolitical blitheness of it).

4/5.

- **I, Robot** (1940-1950) by Isaac Asimov. So sunny! So clumsy! (“His dark eyes smoldered.”) So misanthropic! (The humans call the bots “Boy”, who call humans “master”.) So warmly cool!

3/5. (The story ‘Evidence’ is 4/5.)

- **Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise of Living Alone** (2013) by Eric Klinenberg. This research is very important – tracing the ideological roots of normative pairing, looking at chimps and orangutans and showing the deep flaws in the research that claims that married people are on average happier. But that’s all covered in the preface, and Klinenberg’s prose is canting and repetitive – after chapter 4 I could not stand any more of his interviewees’ corporate self-conceptions and language (“I needed this in order to grow as a person”). It is wholly cool and righteous to live alone; but talking about it this way is revolting.

3/5, once you’ve absorbed the headline.

I've often said, I grew up under socialism, and it saved my family"), but otherwise this is one long Acknowledgments page.

2/5.

- ***The End of an Old Song*** (1957) by JD Scott. Good, nasty coming of age story of some Borders boys, one diffident and Carawayan, one coiled and voracious. The narrator's one distinguishing quality is eloquence about his friend, and for once this device is not taken for granted – people remark on his skill at describing and paeaning Alastair. He reuses certain idiosyncratic, ear-worm words – “illimitable”, “aviary” as an adjective for a woman – to great effect.

“She’s English.” I said.

Alastair made a Scotch noise in the back of his throat.

Annoyed at the conclusion – there’s an Oxfordian twist that I resent. But the details make it – rationing, the Scotch cringe, the good, miserable wages of sin.

4/5.

- ***Hyperion*** (1997) by Dan Simmons. Starts terribly, with the broody protagonist playing a grand piano outside in a storm. Also, despite being set in 3200CE or whatev, it makes a gauche number of leaden references to the culture of C20th Earth. But the structure (6 tales from 7 travellers, from Chaucer) and the sheer variety of styles and themes soon kick in and drag you through its delicious cyber-goth intrigue. The poet character is fucking annoying, but he’s meant to be. (The key problem of metafiction: to write a great poet character, you really have to be a great poet yourself. Nabokov was, but even he dodged the issue by making *Pale Fire* about a flawed poet.) At one point it implies that Keats’ poems were retrocaused by the schemes of time-travelling AIs, a thing that must be admired.

4/5.

SEPTEMBER 2014

- ***Government Expenditure Review Scotland 2014, and the Dunleavy Report, and the McCrone Report, and the Stiglitz Currency Advice, and the Fucking News*** (2014).
- ***Why Moral Theory is Boring and Corrupt*** (c. 2009) by the Unknown Anti-ethicist. ...And redundant, procrustean, and worse than nothing to boot! Interesting iconoclasm uploaded to the Open University unsigned. Their criticisms of thought-experiments and the absence of real emotional phenomenology from academic ethics are not unprecedented, but the constructive answer offered here is: “instead of calculation or logic-chopping, just love”. There are no hatchet jobs on humans here; the axe is for concepts and methodology. (Singer is cited as an example of what not to do, but not cruelly.) I think their attack on the psychological possibility of having a Master Factor ethical life by holding apart the criterion of rightness from the deliberative procedure is the only key wrong part of this; but if you disagree, then you may well never have to read moral theory ever again (just novels instead). I wonder whether they really couldn’t publish this under their own name. Anonymity has certainly suppressed interest, which, given this paper’s power, speaks very ill of the ability of philosophers to transcend social pressure. (PhilPapers records just 97 downloads for the paper.)

5?/5.

- ***The Atrocity Archives*** (2001) by Charlie Stross. Four books in, I’m starting to get annoyed at every character sharing Stross’ fondness for naff nerd references at moments of high drama. But it took four books. So! Nazi mages, Turing as founder of scientific magic, and some very rigorous nonsense – e.g. the killer gaze of the Medusa is modernised as a quantum observer-effect in which the collapse of a super-position adds protons to carbon nuclei, forming silicon(!) Cosma Shalizi calls it ‘mind candy’, which is perfect.

3*/5. [Library]

- ***In the Light of What We Know*** (2014) by Zia Haider Rahman. Two globish co-dependents of unequal intelligence but equal mawkishness take turns at monologue, for ages and ages. One's oracular, the other Boswellian, which means that both talk about the nasty past of the oracular one, Zafar. Everyone's always trying to educate everyone else, without invitation. Tragic, panoptic, and handles critical C21st problems – neocolonialism, quant finance, the ineffectiveness of NGOs, the nature of the transnational élite that administers all these things. But also dull, overwritten and clumsily polymathic (characters can be found over-reading, variously, Gödel, Middlemarch, the birth of Bangladesh, the Brit-pop band James). The book is aware of its pomp – there's a long discussion of sincerity as virtue and vice, a raging attack on Anglophone Indian literature, and Zafar quotes more and more as he disintegrates, suggesting that the book's larding of quotations is a knowing prop. But while I don't know whether it's Zafar or Rahman that the book's clumsiness is rooted in, I don't have to, to know that his conceit of desperate knowledge didn't take root in me.

I shouldn't say panoptic: there's only one woman in this, really, and we don't see much even of her except as deceiver and appalling vehicle for privilege. Chapter 14's good – a big bickering, drunken dinner with Pakistani elites, and there are details to admire throughout (Zafar broods over microaggressions, and some of his apercus are sparkling – like his characterisation of maths as “thinking without the encumbrance of knowledge”, or his likening of a good essay to “a good dress – long enough to cover the important bits, short enough to be interesting”). Last, very superficially: there are no speech marks, and this deadens the dialogue for me; it makes everything look past-tense and snarky. (Ok sure this works incredibly well in *Blood Meridian*, but only because all the men in that are wholly dead inside). Will Self minus electricity; Coetzee minus originality and 12-gauge philosophical calibre. Speaking as a pompous generalist and an inveterate over-writer...

3/5.

- ***Roadside Picnic*** (1972) by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, translated by Olena Bormashenko. Ah, great! Earthy, economic sci-fi; aliens visit, ignore us entirely, and soon leave, leaving behind only transcendent junk and horror-film

phenomena from their little picnic. Prose is lovely and plain, translated with subtlety (we get “scabby”, “sham”, “mange”). The ordinary, crude protagonist Red is scrabbling illegally to provide for his mutant family (the Strugatskys use cash and cash pressure amazingly, grounding the whole cosmic fantasy in commerce, crime, exploitation). Every time Red gets cash, he throws it away – in someone’s face as an insult, in someone’s face as a distraction to evade capture, or just away. No explanations except bureaucratic filler; no salvation, just dumb defiance. A really nice original touch is that Red interprets the body language of his friends in extreme detail – a scratched nose means, to him, “Whoah, Red, be careful how rough you play with the new kid”. Also notable for being a Soviet novel set in mid-west America, evoked very, very well. And the Russian Soul bubbling under their dismal economics rings out without catching in the barrel:

HAPPINESS, FREE, FOR EVERYONE; LET NO ONE BE FORGOTTEN!

4/5. [Library]

- Gave up: ***Another Country*** (1952) by James Baldwin. Doubtlessly important, but formally and lyrically grim. Impossibility of interracial love among racism, impossibility of calm for anyone with any really big plans, impossibility of sexual satisfaction, impossibility of peace for a manly man, impossibility of finishing the damn thing. [Library]
- ***The Signal and the Noise*** (2013) by Nate Silver. A nice surprise! He's very pleased with himself (as well as being pleased with the Bayesian methods he owes his success to). But arrogance can be earned. (A minor peeve: the hot topics "data science" and "big data" are really just good old Victorian statistics with a sprinkling of Silicon Valley fairy dust. But don't tell anyone I said so, or my wage will drop 30%.)

4/5. [Library]

- Reread: ***The Pleasures of the Damned*** (2009) by Bukowski. The anti-social phallocrat waves his pen in the wee small hours – yet often manages beauty. It's a Best-of, but actually not his best. Bukowski is Springsteen after Rosalita, Mary, Janey, Sandy, Trudy and the rest have either moved town forever to get away from him, or died.

3*/5 and 5/5

- ***Big Java – Late Objects*** (2013) by Cay Horstmann. And again I sign away my mind's dirigible dilettantism for a whole damn year. I got a lot more out of Codecademy and being shut in a room until I eventually produce working code, though.

2/5. [Library]

*Among the taller wood with ivy hung,
The old fox plays and dances round her young.
She snuffs and barks if any passes by
And swings her tail and turns prepared to fly.
The horseman hurries by, she bolts to see,*

*And turns agen, from danger never free.
If any stands she runs among the poles
And barks and snaps and drives them in the holes.
The shepherd sees them and the boy goes by
And gets a stick and prongs the hole to try.
They get all still and lie in safety sure,
And out again when everything's secure,
And start and snap at blackbirds bouncing by
To fight and catch the great white butterfly.*

- John Clare



Cover of Colin Farrelly's 'Introduction to Political Theory' – unsigned.

Human beings differ from other animals because they are sufficiently intelligent to wish that they could stop working and reasoning – and free enough to toil harder than other creatures to pursue both these aims in order to eventually enjoy free time.

It follows that Homo faber and Homo sapiens are only contingent consequences of the truly essential Homo ludens. The fact that philosophers do not typically endorse this view only clarifies why they rarely qualify as champions of common sense...

– Luciano Floridi

Aa our knawledge is haufin; aa our prophesiein is haufin: but whan the perfyte is comed, the onperfyte will be by wi. In my bairn days, I hed the speech o a bairn, the thochts o a bairn, the mind o a bairn, but nou at I am grown manmuckle, I am through wi aathing bairnlie... In smaa: there is three things bides for ey: faith, howp, luve. But the grytest o the three is luve.

– I Corinthians 13, via William Lorimer

Formal education is really interfering with my studies.

OCTOBER 2014

- ***Anthologie Prévert*** (1981) by Jacques Prévert. Hooray for the only poems I can read in French! Nursery rhymes, but with razorwire not far beneath. The simplicity (loads of basic nouns repeated dozens of times – “oiseaux” and “roi”, “oiseaux” and “roi”) makes me look nervily over my shoulder – for the real attacker. ‘Chant Song’ is so gorgeous, daft.

3*/5.

- ***Andromache*** (1990) by Douglas Dunn. Epic verse sounds pat to me, and doubly so when it’s forced to fit dialogue: mumming couples expositing couplets. (“*I’ll kill myself. That final ploy shall save / My honour. Then I’ll give back from the grave / What I owe Pyrrhus.*”) Not Dunn’s fault – the pentameter’s solid, but 3/5 is the highest I can give epic couplets cos I am limited and jaded. And he agrees: “It was a bloody hard piece of work... and I think it was universally agreed that I didn’t fully succeed.”

2/5.

- ***The Regulars*** (2004) by Sarah Stolfa. Very exposed and yet kind portraits from a Philadelphia bar she tended. No action soever, just an ordinary sleazy goofy beauty. All worth it. Foreword from Jonathan Franzen is full-on ‘eh’.

4/5.

- ***Antifragile*** (2012) by Nassim Taleb. The most ambitious and messy book in his four-volume *Incerto*. This is vast, chaotic philosophy of resistance, equal parts artful and rigorous. Every other page has something worth hearing (for its iconoclasm, or a Latin gobbet, or catty anecdote), if not something globally and evidently true. (I think he is right about 35% of the time, which is among the highest credences I have for anyone. I only think I am 40% right, for instance.) The core point, repeated a couple of hundred times for various domains:

In real life, many systems deteriorate without an irregular supply of stressors (non-fatal negative events), and actually benefit from them by overreacting and building spare capacity. By robbing such ‘antifragile’ systems of stressors, modern approaches to managing them do damage in the guise of helping out.

There's a whole bunch superficially wrong with the book; I discuss my gripes in more detail here. But it talks about everything, is historically wide-eyed, relentlessly rational, and often funny. Also the method-worldview-style it suggests might be one way to stop life crushing us utterly.

4*/5.

- Aloud: ***The Stairwell*** (2014) by Michael Longley. Flickers between the Classical general and the wattle-byre specific. All really personal – but not in the universally interesting melodramatic way. It is personal in the way that hanging around the vestibule of a friend of a friend of a friend's house when one didn't know they were dropping past and one quite needs the toilet is personal. Also, it's full up with the (apparently haute Irish?) obsession with Attic Greece. One or two amazing ones – see “Amelia’s Poem” at the bottom of this.

3/5.

NOVEMBER 2014

- ***Philosophy and Computing: An Introduction*** (2001) by Luciano Floridi. Whistle-stop hyperbole in the way of Continentals, but grounded by its technical knowledge and techno-optimism:

The history of modern thought has been characterised by an increasing gap between mind and reality. It is a process of epistemic detachment which has been irresistible ever since it began, and quite inevitably so. Knowledge develops as mind's answer to the presence of the non-mental. It is the means whereby the subject establishes a minimal distance, and emancipates itself, from the object. The rise of dualism and the escalating interaction between traditional knowledge, as an object, and innovative knowledge, as a further reaction to it, has led to the emergence of a new world.

Notice the skilled and non-fatuous use of phenomenological blah! Chapter 2, his fast and very formal discussion of Boole, Gödel and Turing, took me about half a week. The tiny concluding chapter – in which he locates computers in the history of human freedom, as Hephaestean handmaids – makes me giddy. Slightly dated where it talks PC specs, and he loves a goofy neologism (“egology”, “corporeal membranes”), but grand, sceptical, grand, supervenient.

4/5.

(His ‘Informational Nature of Personal Identity’ and ‘Turing’s Three Lessons’ are 4*/5.)

- ***Surviving*** (2009) by Allan Massie. Drunk or ex-drunk Anglos bitch around Rome. Some of the literary references are a bit much (“The boy was reading Stendhal; how bad could he be?”) but the nasty driving fatigue underneath is good. Has a really ugly binding and font, so I’ve compensated the score in case I am shallow.

3/5.

- Aloud: ‘***The’ ““Rubaiyyat” of ‘Omar Khayyam’***’ (2014) by Vanessa Hodgkinson. I use those apostrophes advisedly. Gaudy and hectic word-association, with only tenuous formal or thematic links to Khayyam, but fizzing with verve of its own. (Vine is a video fragment public diary; Wine is an excellent Windows emulator.) Teeming with clumsy nerdy ephemera, but I think it will be worth reading in 10 years. Let’s see. Works *much* better aloud.

4/5.

- ***Rationality for Mortals*** (2008) by Gerd Gigerenzer. Yet another volley in the ‘rationality wars’. GG sets himself against the heuristics and biases folk (though note he is also not of the fatuous constructionist camp which says, roughly: ‘it’s impossible for *everyone* to be irrational, because reason is *only* social, so we are the measure of it’) by minimising the apparent irrationality uncovered by the cognitive sciences in the last little while. Key claims:
 1. Heuristics are not just faster or more tractable, but *better* than Bayesian formalism.
 2. People are not flawed Bayesians but natural frequentists.

Bayesian algorithmics is attainable by humans; nor are the misconceptions in table 1.1 (p.9) ever stated so strongly. Also 2) GG's evidence on e.g. the framing of the conjunction fallacy doesn't replicate. But anyway this is well-argued, well-written, scientific in the highest sense, and wrong? Read this instead.

4/5.

DECEMBER 2014

- Reread: '**Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street**' (1853) by Herman Melville. One of the *Frankensteins*, those endlessly interpretable load-bearing columns dotted around literature. Of negation, dignity, irrationality, silence, impermeability. What is Bartleby, if not just depressed or hyper-lazy? Well there's the defensive Stoic catatonia, or wu wei; Bartleby as crypto-proto-Marxist; Bartleby as wanng Übermensch, squatter monk, annoying Christ; Bartleby as dissociating schizoprene or autist; Bartleby as Death of Dead Letters; Bartleby as PTSD ghost; Bartleby as all our inarticulate idiosyncracy; as utter Other – "pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn!"

Some people (e.g. Blanchot, Hardt & Negri, Setiya) view him as heroic, but he's more hallucinogenic and morbid: he lacks everything but refusal; he throws his life away. And that's a living death, a non-human void ("I never feel so private as when I know [Bartleby is] here").

So true it is, and so terrible too, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not. They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill. To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it.

That copyists are an extinct breed only adds to the seething flavour; it is *possible* that OCR and distributed Captchas could have minimised Bartleby's suffering - that the condition the piece wrangles with isn't eternal. What would Bartleby be today? Not, I think, an Occupier; rather a impassive backstreets bookshop

owner, or a kombucha stallholder or whatnot. I prefer to read Melville's voice - waffling Victorian persiflage - as an assumed decoration for the windbag lawyer's voice (however much *Moby Dick* shouts otherwise).

5/5.

- **Question Everything** (2014) by New Scientist readers. 132 lovely earthings of sky-high theory. Not much new to me, but was vital as refresher course and mind candy. The tacit connections between the answers are the real thing – for instance, I guessed (wrongly) that synchrotron radiation and Cherenkov radiation were based on the same mechanism, and feel very happy that a quick and public disconfirmation was available. Here (and Quora is apparently very good because of its paywall).

3*/5.

- **The Blunders of Our Governments** (2013) by Anthony King and Ivor Crewe. Insofar as anything is uncontroversial in politics – the most mired of intellectual backwaters – this sticks to uncontroversial blunders. So we only get the internally incoherent or screwy policies like Suez; poll tax; ERM Black Wednesday. (The book's larger point is that there are more and more of these to come, because of the shape of Westminster's gears.) A compressed, formal style – hiding its anger, so ministerial ignorance and snobbishness gets called "cultural disconnect" – but constructive and schadenfreudish too. First chapter is a list of state successes (green belts, social housing boom and sale, Clean Air, seat belts, vaccinations, minimum wage, smoking ban, swine flu prep) included as a counter-libertarian tonic before launching into the peaky blunders. (This first chapter actually made my chest swell.)

4/5.

- **The Reith Lectures 2014** by Atul Gawande. Cool stories, world-changing practical interventions - but indifferent philosophy. Of systems, fallibility, humaneness. As with other systems theorists like Meadows, I accept the general swing – ‘this shit is hard; the pieces don’t show the whole’ – but don’t see how their proposals are actually different from classic reductionism (that dirty word which is in fact clean practice). A checklist is a reduction of a chaotic array of

options into atoms of action! A system can only be specified if you understand what are interacting. The points about treating patients like humans are presumably right but not that simple to implement without first lessening medics' workloads a whole lot?

3/5.

(Cites 'Towards a Theory of Medical Fallibility' (1975) by MacIntyre and Gorovitz. 4*/5.)

- ***Reliable Essays*** (2001) by Clive James. Mostly *haute* subjects here, always *bas* on crap. He: brags about having spotted Heaney's ambit very early, points out the fatal ideological flaws in both Mailer and Greer, fiercely challenges translations from the Italian, the Russian, the German; summarises every major photography book of the late 70s; shows that liberalism and classicism remain standing, "less bad than all the others" even after the sustained insult of C20th Theory; and other such generalist feats. The titles of the last two sections – "Almost Literature" and "Practically Art" – are scale models of both his style and critical mission: to raise the foully sunken, or shield the great assailed.

4*/5.

- ***Dictionary of Received Ideas*** (1870s) by Gustave Flaubert. *Stuff White People Like* plus *Speak your Branes*, for C19th France: the contradictory and petty zeitgeist. I myself have used 'alabaster' to describe a woman, whoops.

3/5.

- In one sitting in a hotel café: ***Wolf in White Van*** (2014) by John Darnielle. Scrunched-up, guileless portrait of outcast youth via choose-your-own-adventure and emotional reconstruction. Though first-person, it circles the ruined protagonist Sean warily, not looking directly at him in his isolation, powerlessness, and very occasional gratuitous joy. A couple of those Darnielle lines resonate out from the hurt and 80s ephemera – "[All I knew of Lance were] the parts he hadn't been able to stop himself from mentioning, the pieces of himself that flew naturally from him like sparks from a torch", "...No shortage of things still left to do" – but JD is not so concerned with making the narrator

lyrical; in fact a large theme is that Sean (as with Lance's folly) is mundane and inexplicable, even to himself. *Out of character*. And, as always with Darnielle we get the quiet or defiant or perverse or poetic appreciation of the devalued (p.186!). (Alan Bennett: "Oh, I'm unhappy, but not unhappy about it". Darnielle:

*the Sean who built the [game] is as distant from me now
as the Sean who blew his face off is from both of us. All
three live in me, I guess, but those two, and God knows
how many others, are like fading scents. I know they're
still there. I could find them if I needed them. But I don't
need them, and one of them survives only in bits and
pieces. They certainly don't need me. They are complete
just as they are.*

)

3*/5.

- ***The New Testament in Scots*** (1967 CE) by William Lorimer. In the form that survived, Scots is a uniformly profane language – not in the sense of profanity, but as in worldly and comic and demotic. Some of that opinion is classist stereotype; it certainly wasn't true four hundred years ago (the devotional poems of Dunbar and Henryson stand up to the sacred efforts in any language); but most is real, down to Knox's decision on a legally-mandatory bible in English, but even more to the cultural capture of the nation's Anglicised elites, but even more than that to the simple dictates of shared economic activity, over three hundred years: i.e. *we gave* English our sacred talk, then *we gave* English our intellectual talk, and then trade talk, and law talk, and all their formal accoutrements. Until only the informal and proletarian was left. Atweill, the kitsch prevails ("Hoots ma wee bonnie lassie! Ahiiii wid wauk fyv hhundrid myles"). When Lorimer wrote this, the dialectisation of Scots, and the cutesy granny-aff-a-bus process wasn't so advanced - but this is the register we moderns read it in, unless we are rural and lucky.

(Nasty but probable thing I once heard a linguist lecture on: relatively few languages develop the scientific-philosophical register and benefit from its sharpening vocabularies. He reckoned that only nine ever have, *fully*: Chinese, Arabic, Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Russian, German, French, English. Scots definitely had speakers sophisticated enough, in its High Medieval heyday, but the internationalist use of Latin precluded it.)

Lorimer saw a Bible translation as one of two conditions that would revitalise Scots. (The language, rather than the dialect Scots English.) (The other big brick being the great Dictionary.) Well, we have both now, and they are not enough. I think the argument for bringing back languages is only superficially the humane one, since language is for communication first, and our condition is more and more a global one. (I find it difficult to fault Katja Grace's analysis: the standard arguments fail, and the present matters more than the past, because it is where value actually happens.)

Lorimer translated it straight from the Koine Greek over a full decade, finishing the second draft just before his death. The art comes in his rendering the apostles with their own voice and distinctive idiolect. (Paul is, here as ever, a nasty little man: smug and litigious.) While I'm very glad this exists, the book itself can do little for me, whatever language it's wearing. (Nothing takes me further from religious awe than the actual things we said God said. Hauflin' indeed.)

N/A.

*Amelia, your newborn name
Combines with the midwife's word
And, like smoke from driftwood fires
Wafts over the lochside road
Past the wattle byre – hay bales
For ponies, Silver and Whisper –
Between drystone walls' river-
Rounded moss-clad ferny stones,
Through the fenceless gate and gorse
To the flat erratic boulder
Where otters and your mother rest,
Spraints black as your meconium,
Fish bones, fish scales, shitty sequins
Reflecting what light remains.*

- Michael Longley

I cannot emphasize too strongly that the tricks taught in this book are intended only to enable you to build better systems. They are not in any way given as a means of helping you to break into systems, subvert copyright protection mechanisms, or do anything else unethical or illegal.

Where possible I have tried to give case histories at a level of detail that illustrates the underlying principles without giving a 'hacker's cookbook'.

Should This Book Be Published at All?

Self-criticism in Anderson (2005)

*Goodness... You gotta make it out of badness...
cos there's nothing else to make it out of.*

— Robert Penn Warren

*The craft of programming gratifies creative longings
built deep within us and delights sensibilities we have in
common with all men, providing five kinds of joys:*

- *The joy of making things;*
- *The joy of making things that are useful to other people;*
- *The fascination of fashioning puzzle-like objects of interlocking moving parts;*
- *The joy of always learning, of a nonrepeating task;*
- *The delight of working in a medium so tractable — pure thought-stuff — which nevertheless exists, moves, and works in a way that word-objects do not.*

— Fred Brooks

When I give something 5?/5 I'm predicting that I'll reread the thing, not more. It's a hedged bet: I don't think the very greatest echelons of value can be known immediately. It takes time, and continuity, and the accumulation of meaning. Only if one's appreciation survives the changes one goes through can you really say it's the top. Call no book favourite until you are dead.

JANUARY 2015

- At the bells: ***The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*** (2002) by Hilary Putnam. A remarkable piece of meta-ethics, established in large part by undermining... neoclassical economics.

Important quibble: The title evokes sexy French relativism – e.g. there is no fact of the matter, il n'y a pas de hors-texte – whereas his actual thesis is that only the strictest, stupidest partition between facts and values collapsed. (A distinction is the mild statement that A is not the same thing as B – whereas a dichotomy is the strict logical exclusion of two things: ‘if something is A, it is a priori not B’.) A pedantic quibble: god he is fond of italics.

Anyway. It collapsed, but still lives on in other fields, decades after the fall of the positivism that was the only thing motivating it. Book is: a scathing modern history of the distinction, a Pragmatic reconstruction, a love letter to Amartya Sen. Putnam blames the philosophical dichotomy for the failures of economics, and from there for real suffering.

The word “cruel”... has a normative and indeed, ethical use. If one asks me what sort of person my child’s teacher is, and I say “he is very cruel,” I have both criticized him as a teacher and...as a man. I do not have to add, “he is not a good teacher” or “he is not a good man.” I cannot simply... say, “he is a very cruel person and a good man,” and be understood. Yet “cruel” can also be used purely descriptively, as when a historian writes that a certain monarch was exceptionally cruel, or that the cruelties of the regime provoked a number of rebellions. “Cruel” simply ignores the supposed fact/value dichotomy and cheerfully allows itself to be used sometimes for a normative purpose and sometimes as a descriptive term. (Indeed, the same is true of the term “crime.”)

Some claims: Factual and evaluative statements are necessarily entangled, since; Facts are ascertained *as such* only by the application of epistemic values: "coherence, plausibility, reasonableness, simplicity, and elegance... if these epistemic values do enable us to correctly describe the world... that is something we see through the lenses of those very values."; i.e. facts are thick too; i.e. he has been made to "*rethinking the whole dogma (the last dogma of empiricism?) that facts are objective and values are subjective*". Of course, coupled to his ditching foundationalism, this leads him a long way down the Rortyan road - 'science is just another social practice' yada yada - but he tries to salvage a sort of pragmatic objectivity for science. Dunno if he's winning, but I loved the race.

4*/5.

- Twice: ***The Collected Poems, 1931-1987*** by Czeslaw Milosz. Bought it for someone else, but couldn't give it away. Does much that I usually don't appreciate – both Holocaust musing *and* the relative innocence of nature. But his indirectness and attentiveness lift it way, way beyond the ordinary run of those themes. Never mawkish. Epochal. Here, Here, Here, Here, Here, Here.

5/5.

- ***The Serpent's Promise*** (2013) by Steve Jones. Interesting idea: take Bible literalists literally; see how much of the book's many empirical claims are anywhere near right, re: cosmogony, hygiene, heredity, migration. Couple cool results –

Today, each [Amish] mother has, on average, half a dozen children, and the community is growing at almost 10 per cent a year... At that rate the Amish could, by the middle of the next century, have a population equivalent to the whole of today's United States...

Many saints died in 'the odour of sanctity', a sweet smell supposed to mark the departure of the soul. The scent is that of acetone, made in the liver as its capital runs out.

– but unstructured, often unclear, and tiring, in the main. Minus a half for having no citations for any of its thousand claims.

2/5.

- ***The Mythical Man-Month*** (1975) by Fred Brooks. How big teams make things.
Also how awesome tech can feel:

Too many interests, too many exciting opportunities for learning, research, and thought. What a marvellous predicament! Not only is the end not in sight, the pace is not slackening. We have many future joys.

The oldest thing by far on my computing syllabus and nearly the most stylish.* Anniversary edition has a chapter which is just the whole book boiled down to its propositions, and whether or not they stood up twenty years later, which is a thing that most non-fiction could gravely benefit from. (You sometimes see the like of this in honest philosophy books, included as ‘analytical index’ or ‘prolegomenon’ or ‘exordium’.) Brooks is not merely exoteric, not just an IBM mook; suitably acerbic and suitably enthusiastic. The open secret of programming is that it is actually a whole barrel of fun, just one that scares the shit out of most people. NB: The Christian God rears up at unexpected intervals – and at one point Brooks recommends openly patriarchal programming teams on the model of “God’s plan for marriage”. But it doesn’t much get in the way.

4/5. [Library]

* (I set myself Shannon, Wang, Knuth.)

- ***Hermione and Her Group of Serious Thinkers*** (1916) by Don Marquis. Funny, bitchy slander of the hippies and pseuds of a century ago. Vague, snobbish, hypocritical, self-congratulatory, appropriative: that is, not much has changed up to our New Agers and hipsters. Repetitive – too many puns about howdahs, etc – and more than three-quarters of it assumes the voices of rhythmically insufferable idiots. Its real value, apart from hammering home the difference between Marquis’ own true poetic voice and the banal vers libre he uses, is as history lesson. The Orientalist, relativist bohemian mysticism was *far* from an innovation of the Sixties. Notice that, even while despairing of Hermione, Marquis hangs around her all the same, a hanger-on to hangers-on. Give it an

hour, do.

4/5.

- Reread, aloud: **Monogamy** (1996) by Adam Philips. Harsh, circuitous, questioning gobblets on the greatest secular religion. I guess he's a bit overfond of the knowing paradox ("Seduction, the happy invention of need"; "The problem of a marriage is that it can never be called an affair") – and of course aphorisms have to compress away the qualifications that could make them fairer, and easier to take in large doses.

Infidelity is such a problem because we take monogamy for granted; we treat it as the norm. Perhaps we should take infidelity for granted, assume it with unharassed ease. Then we would be able to think about monogamy.

There are no relationships without conflict. If psychoanalysis has a value, maybe one of its values is just that it abides by the idea that there is always going to be conflict... in a way the book holds out for the value of conflict [being to let] the diverse voices inside of oneself speak.

But it's non-partisan and original and funny and wise and I still haven't absorbed the finer points.

5/5.

FEBRUARY 2015

- **The Black Halo: Collected English Stories** (1977–1998) by Iain Crichton Smith. Best Scottish poet writes good Scottish stories about, mostly, terrible Scottish pragmatists. Steady observational tragedy, and quiet outcast statures. Recurring structure: a staid, professional male narrator tells us his profession on page 1 and admits a whole pack of flaws. Recurring people: the censorious, rabbit islander who was not always so; the passionate and creative woman slowly eroded by island gossip, monotony, stasis; her husband, who knows this

happened because of him. Most striking are ‘The Scream’, ‘What to do About Ralph?’, ‘The Spy’, and ‘The Exorcism’ – but particularly the latter, because I recognised the worst of myself in both the little bastard obsessed with Kierkegaard and the small-souled lecturer who saves him:

I looked at him for a long time knowing that the agony was over... [But] how could I be sure that my own harmonious jealous biography had not been superimposed upon his life, as one writing upon another, in that wood where the birds sang with such sweetness defending their territory?

Much more than clever. **5?/5.**

- **Wars, Guns, and Votes** (2010) by Paul Collier. Economist slices through much bullshit in the course of identifying empirical handles on democracy in the extremely-poor world. His work is deadly serious, innovative and data-rich; but this *book* is chatty and low on representations of his mostly unprecedented, mostly persuasive data. How much does an A-K cost in different parts of the world? Are peacekeepers worth it? Does democracy promote civil war in the absence of wealth? and such vital things.
4/5. [Library]
- **The Hearts of Men** (1983) by Barbara Ehrenreich. Unstereotypical gender sociology: traces the male revolt – years before the sexual revolution – against the comparably rigid breadwinner social role inflicted on them. At the time it was too universal to have a name; it was just known vaguely as 'Conformity' or 'Maturity'. On the white-collar worker:

Their labor had a ghostly quantity that made it hard to quantify and even harder to link to the biochemistry of blood and tissues.

The key virtue of it is that she sympathises (more with the Vidals and Roths than the Menckens and Kerouacs, obviously - but in general too). The key thesis:

In psychiatric theory and popular culture, the image of the irresponsible male blurred into the shadowy figure of the homosexual... Fear of homosexuality kept men in line as husbands and breadwinners; and, at the same time, the association with failure and immaturity made it

almost impossible for homosexual men to assert a positive image...

! Her characteristic wit and resistance to received responses is much in evidence.
4/5. [Library]

- **User Stories Applied** (2005) by Mike Cohn. I only recently learned about a fundamental dichotomy in expressing oneself: you use either the 'esoteric' or the 'exoteric' mode. (The exoteric writer says exactly what she means, minimises ambiguity and tries to do everything with explicit reasoning, for the largest audience they can, with imagery and irony only as decoration. The esoteric writer – who is distinct from but often coterminous with the woo-woo mystical metaphysics fans also called esoteric – does the converse. Most ancient writers wrote esoterically, which is one reason that undergrads and other fools, like me, think that ancient writers are vague and low on content. Up to now, I have been confusing the rhetorical stance - see Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida, Caputo - with the magickal crap. But so much of the Analytic / Continental divide can be explained in this single distinction! [The revival of the distinction is due to the lionized demon Leo Strauss.] Maths is an interesting border case, but its clarity and attempt to destroy ambiguity make it exoteric, I think.)

The exoteric intention strikes me as firstly just good manners and important for intellectual honesty (accountability, critical clarity). But one thing I dislike about studying computer science is that *all* the materials are utterly exoteric. I crave art and irreverence in formal contexts, and that's always at least somewhat esoteric. The 'Agile' software thing strikes me as good, a way of making the hag-ridden and monstrously expensive dev process work. But all the material around Agile, LEAN (and the wider business-marketing-HR-systems theory blah that represents most employed adults' only engagement with passably academic work) is so exoteric that something in me rebels.

3/5.

- **Out of their Minds: The Lives of 15 Computer Scientists** (1995) by Dennis Shasha & Cathy Lazere. An oral history of pioneer computing. These people

aren't generally regarded as what they are: simply that sort of *philosopher who actually solves problems or else rules out their possibility of solution*.

The four parts of this book reflect the four basic questions computer scientists have wrestled with in the last fifty years:

- *Linguists: How should I talk to the machine?*
- *Algorithmists: What will solve a problem fast on my computer?*
- *Architects: Can I build a better computer?*
- *Sculptors of Intelligence: Can I write a program that can find its own solutions?*

The men here developed things modern life could not function without: high-level programming, the hard maths of networking, the hard maths of timestamping, shortest paths, probabilistic solutions to deterministic questions. Knuth comes out as so goddamn wholly loveable.

4/5. [Library]

- ***Naked Lunch*** (1959) by William Burroughs. Disgusting but virtuous. I liked his scientific reports more.

3/5. [Library]

- ***Get Doomed: A Fucking Novella*** (2015) by Paul Wilhelm Crowe. Scattered, scatological Robert Rankinism, written for a friend. Every chapter is called “In which Rupert finds a map”; there is no map and are no Ruperts. The fact that I am a principal sidekick in it (killed on page 3 by a tidal wave of kebab man and reanimated as a Roomba with a T-Pain vocoder) is besides the besides.

3*/5.

MARCH 2015

- *Essays* (1570-90) by Michel de Montaigne, via JM Cohen. Woosh. How many Renaissance people sound this modern, this undeluded? Essay on erectile dysfunction is very funny:

I was shown a man whom the Bishop of Soissons had confirmed... he had been dumb from birth, and had been called Marie up to the age of twenty-two. He said that as he was straining to take a jump his male organs appeared. The girls of that neighbourhood still sing a song in which they warn one another not to take long strides or they may turn into boys...

Most of the others are just very wise and touching, as when he talks about his terrible memory, and misquotes Latin poetry by the bushel, from it. This was a very cut-down edition (only 100 pages, out of maybe 700 in the Complete edition) - probably what one wants, to begin with. Will be back.

5?/5.

- *A whole lorra stuff about pharmacy information systems.* **3/5.**
- *The Fly and the Fly-Bottle: Encounters with British Intellectuals* (1962) by Ved Mehta. Curious portraits of Oxbridge people: the ordinary-language philosophers just as they were awaking from their long radical nap, and the arsey titans of Modern history (Trevor-Roper, Carr, Taylor, Namier). The book was originally a New Yorker series, fitting their house style – gossip on the transcendental – but there’s more gossip than concepts. We get to relive all the angry Times responses to bitchy reviews, learn what Toynbee ordered for dinner at the Athenaeum in late ’62; also the hair colour of everyone involved (Murdoch ‘straight and blonde, recalling the peasant aspect of Saint Joan’). To their faces, Mehta is way too much the deferential alumn, tentatively prodding the dons to be unkind about their peers.

The humans are worth it if you already care: Austin and Namier are tragic hubristic husks; Hare, Ayer, and Toynbee’s charisma blare straight through Mehta’s quiet journalism. The common point is both fields’ slow recovery from

positivism/Wittgensteinian reductionism - the cautious return of theory, and of *human* posits. He has some spirit: after meeting Strawson he says "I took my leave of the scaled-down Kant."; he finishes the book with this wonderful medievalism:

Unless a philosopher finds for us an acceptable faith or synthesis – as Plato and Aristotle did together for their age, and St Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant for theirs – we remain becalmed on a painted ocean of controversy, and for better or worse, insofar as the past is a compass to the future, there will never be anyone to whistle thrice for us and say, once and for all, 'The game is done! I've won! I've won!'

3/5 [Library] (4/5 if you like linguistic philosophy / British historiography).

- Reread: ***Making Money*** (2008) by Terry Pratchett. One sitting. *Salut.* **4/5.**
- ***Vile Bodies*** (1930) by Evelyn Waugh. Another very dark, funny prod of the posh and awful. Lord Monomark, Ginger Littlejohn, Colonel Blount, The Drunken Major, Lottie Crump, The Honourable Agatha Runcible, Miles Malpractice... The Bright Young Things – who are dim – ludicrous wagers – which are won – and the runaway motorcars – oh. Jeeves and Wooster if it had death, teeth, madness and war in. Predicts the next war, or, rather, concocts it in order to punish the frivolous protagonists.
3*/5.
- ***The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies*** (1991) by David Stove. Funny, unfair, rabid dismissal of most philosophy ever. Uses *ad hominem* Bulwerism openly - despite that going against his own ideal of reason - because he views a great range of people as being too mad to engage with. His other move is to use the positivist's wood-chipper principle a lot: 'your position is literally meaningless; you're too stupid to see this', occasionally correctly. Attacks idealists mostly, including whole chapters making fun of Goodman, Nozick, and Popper(!) - but does not spare Mill ("here doing his usual service of making mistakes very *clearly*") and Russell, who you'd think were his kind of men. The last chapter is scary and hilarious and suggests the man's basic pain, underneath

his roaring pessimism.

4/5. (keep it away from freshers though)

- ***Occasional Poets: an Anthology*** (1986), edited by Richard Adams. Poems from people not known as poets, yielding a equal mix of dedicatories, doggerel, and diamond. Their styles are mostly preserved, epitomised: the big grim novelists (Lessing, Coetzee, Fowles, Murdoch, Golding) write enormous grit-tooth verse;

*Heads bowed down or thrown
Backward open-eyed
Here and there are dark
With terrible deaf pictures.
Sounds rise up and vanish
Into a pitted dome.
It continues to rain.
The acoustics being imperfect some people fidget.*

*Something which is pure is come
To a high magnetic field.
Cry out as it passes on
When shall we be healed?*

Raymond Briggs, a quiet, brutal elegy; David Lodge, some good meta jokes; animal bits from Jan Morris and Stella Gibbons; Wodehouse, two wonderful gossipy hyperboles. Adams manages to pick out the only Naomi Mitchison poems I don't like. A lot of unbridled sentiment, e.g. Arnold Wesker depressing his children, Francis King's lies spiralling down, Enoch Powell lying awake listening to his wife's asthma; the writers aren't expecting the irony-making pressures of publication, or the obsessive polishing of any work that will be identified with *them*. So it's free indeed. Until Adams.

4*/5.

Hero and Bad Mother in Epic, a poem

dusk seeps up the entrail of the seaborn nude
the vegetable sleeps in its circle
the bedroom drowses
the casino is swathed in tidal melancholia
the nude awaits the hero

mounting the entrail of the seaborn nude
toward the sleeping vegetable
toward the poisoned goose with its melancholy aftertaste
comes the naked philatelist of fiction

the philatelist climbs the entrail of the poisoned nude
who rules over the luck-swathed fiction
of castaway matriarch
punctual chimera
spider of solitude
the philatelist climbs the entrail of the nude
toward a bedroom where a sword drowses

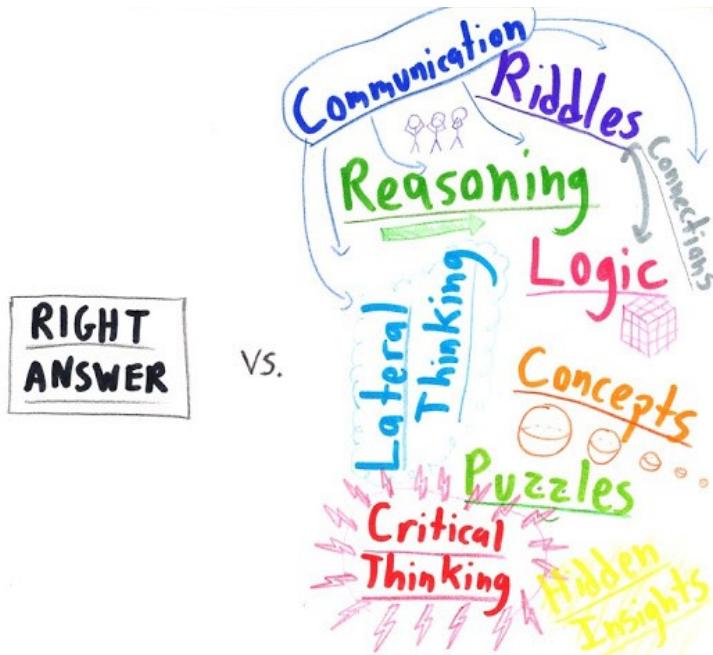
the drowsy sword in the spare bedroom
of the casino in the tidal nude
awaits the philatelist of melancholia
through the symmetrical aftertaste of goose
the castaway philatelist gropes
he circles the poisoned casino
and enters the bedroom of the nude of solitude
where the sword of fiction drowses
the seaborn philatelist brandishes the sword of fiction

the philatelist the bedroom the spider
the casino MOONBURST the goose
the matriarch the sword the fiction

past the sleeping vegetable and the poisoned goose
with its melancholy aftertaste
the castaway philatelist descends the entrail of the sleeping nude

but the nude of solitude is dreaming new dreams
the downfall of calligraphy she dreams
the documents of panic
the iron in the milk
the axes of sleep
the perfumes of the dead
the geography of caution
the crocodile of blood
the counterfeit footfall
the terrible tailor
the shadowy root
the feminine kingdom

– JM Coetzee



(c) Ben Orlin (2015)

Increasingly, people seem to interpret complexity as sophistication, which is baffling – the incomprehensible should cause suspicion, not admiration. Possibly this results from the mistaken belief that using a mysterious device confers [extra] power on the user.

– Niklaus Wirth

“I’m afraid I don’t understand that” was a reply uttered in those days with great self-righteousness, the implication being that what you had said was deficient in true ordinariness... It was felt to be a very strong defence, not only intellectually but also morally. (“You are confused or pretentious, or both; my inability to understand is proof of virtue.”)

– Jasper Griffin

Had my Final exams, but that didn't stop me doing these, for reasons of perversity.

I wonder about books that would take me a full 3 months to read. *Infinite Jest* seems to take people at least this long (not me, cause I'm a fanboy who flatters himself as living very near to DFW's own native frequency). I've just gotten the LessWrong bible, but that is more of a single happy month, to be administered whenever one feels that human history is futile... There's the giant crunchy formal bastions: Kendall's Advanced

Theory; University Physics; TAOCP. (Though, as DFW points out, the reason these would take 3 months is not their difficulty, really:

If you said, ‘I spent the whole night in the library, working on a sociology paper’, you really meant that you’d spent between two and three hours working on it and the rest fidgeting and sharpening and organising pencils and doing skin-checks in the mirror and wandering around the stacks opening volumes at random and reading about, say, Durkheim’s theories of suicide.

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APRIL 2015

- ***Rip it Up and Start Again: Post-punk 1978-1984*** (2006) by Simon Reynolds.
Exhaustive essay on art and/versus pop, politics and/versus aesthetics, intellect and/versus passion, and on how seriously music should, in general, be taken. He reads post-punk as far wider than the sombre anti-rock art-school thing people usually take it to be – so he includes Human League and ABC as post-punks with emphasis on the post: His scope is total: everything’s here (except for oi, hardcore, Ramonescore – i.e. the people who failed to make it past punk).
Reynolds divides the genre in three broad camps:

1. modernists (PiL, Cab Vol, No Wave, industrial, SST prog-punk),
2. New Pop and synth,
3. retro-eclectics (two-tone, Goth, Northern Soul).

Reynolds has more critical acumen than any of the mooks in the brainy bands; more love than the fey melodists. I have lived in the post-punk woods – too jaded and too hopeful to be a punk – for getting on a decade, and I thought myself a connoisseur: until now I was not. Full review [here](#).

4*/5.

- ***Beyond Fear: Thinking Sensibly about Security in an Uncertain World*** (2005) by Bruce Schneier. Some hard lessons taken from computer security are spun out into a general theory of Defence. His language is sometimes a little banal, but

there is a fully worked-out and rigorous model of the world underneath, without deference to the creeping establishment or the splurging radicals.

3*/5. [Library]

- **Algorithmics: The Spirit of Computing** (1991) by David Harel. A thing of beauty: Harel's attempt to write a work of computer science that doesn't date. The general abstract introductory matter. The field is hugely consequential: different algorithms for the same task can differ in performance by massive orders of magnitude. Bible quotations book-end each chapter and give this a frisson of something other.

4/5. [Library]

- **Brief Interviews with Hideous Men** (1999) by David Foster Wallace. Draining, scarifying, funny, hyperactive, elevating. ‘Content warning’, as we now say. For instance, the person described in this passage is one story’s hero, a remarkable and powerful agent:

[her] prototypical sandals, unrefined fibers, daffy arcana, emotional incontinence, flamboyantly long hair, extreme liberality on social issues, financial support from parents they revile, bare feet, obscure import religions, indifferent hygiene, a gooey and somewhat canned vocabulary, the whole predictable peace-and-love post-Hippie diction...

i.e. He comes up with a perfect encapsulation of a facile social trend, but throws away his anger about it, makes us realise that our efforts to be tasteful / rational / grown-up are, here, making us small. DFW was an early mover in the revived Third Culture we can all enjoy: writing about the technical in terms of its meaning. But he was different: his syncretism came out of the negations of high postmodern theory, rather than the usual humanists with science backgrounds.

Or like just another manipulative pseudopomo Bullshit artist who's trying to salvage a fiasco by dropping back to a metadimention and commenting on the fiasco itself.

‘On His Deathbed, Holding Your Hand’ made me cry long.

5?/5.

- ***Thinking in Systems: A Primer*** (2009) by Donella Meadows. I was a tad hostile to this at first – mostly because her field bred a generation of pseudos who use ‘reductionism’ as an insult (rather than as an ontological term or useful way of thinking, instances of which denote the highest achievements of the species). This is the power behind the quotation from Niklaus Wirth, above. It is an attempt to make holism rigorous; given holism’s deep intuitive appeal for people, the attempt is worthy attempt. But let’s get clear:

“REDUCTIONISM” (to the pseud): The claim that complicated or immeasurable things do not exist.

“SYSTEMS THEORY” (to the pseud): The only way of understanding things is as a whole. Everything else omits and so isn’t full.

REDUCTIONISM (ontology): The claim that complicated things are made of simpler things. Only the simplest of them are physically real; the rest are mental models of their interactions.*

REDUCTIONISM (methodology): The attempt to isolate causes and treat phenomena in terms of their most basic units (whether quark, string, person, transaction).

SYSTEMS THEORY: When things get together, they exhibit features the individual things don’t.

So stated, there is no conflict between good old reduction and shiny systems thinking. But Meadows distils the juicy bits into <200pp here, and freely admits that systems theory has an intractable indeterminacy built into it, and says this, too:

Ever since the Industrial Revolution, Western society has benefited from science, logic, and reductionism over intuition and holism. Psychologically and politically we would much rather assume that the cause of a problem is “out there,” rather than “in here.” It’s almost irresistible to blame something or someone else, to shift responsibility away from ourselves, and to look for... the technical fix that will make a problem go away.

Serious problems have been solved by focusing on external agents — preventing smallpox, increasing food production, moving large weights and many people rapidly over long distances. Because they are embedded in larger systems, however, some of our “solutions” have created further problems... Hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, economic instability, unemployment, chronic disease, drug addiction, and war, for example, persist in

s spite of the analytical ability and technical brilliance that have been directed toward eradicating them. No one deliberately creates those problems, no one wants them to persist, but they persist nonetheless.

That is because they are intrinsically systems problems – undesirable behaviors characteristic of the system structures that produce them. They will yield only as we reclaim our intuition, stop casting blame, see the system as the source of its own problems, and find the courage and wisdom to restructure it.

Systems talk is not just interdisciplinary, but meta-disciplinary. But it can rarely resolve empirical questions in the way that physics does. In saying, probably rightly, that a flow could go either way, depending on the state of the rest of the system and neighbouring systems, you lose or sideline crucial power to find out a single cause's influence, and thereby know more or less exactly what to do to the system. In other places, knowledge comes from isolating causes. A reductionist can agree with all the clever diagrams in this, happily concede that they *illustrate* the gnarly problems of collective action and other ecosystems very clearly, and not give up their peerlessly successful ontological stance at all.

3*/5.

* Also PHYSICALISM: Everything is made of physical things.
(However, the physical may be stranger than you think.)

MAY 2015

- ***The Conquest of the Useless: Diaries from the Making of Fitzcarraldo*** (2004) by Werner Herzog, transl. Krishna Winston. I have a weird relationship with Herzog. The films' typical tone and message (Nietzschean tragicomedy) doesn't really appeal to me. I watch them – and I watch them all, even since *Dinotasia* – for their literal and figurative voice: his relentless Teutonic ecstatic absurdity. I watch, waiting for that voice to roll out and make me hurt or laugh. (Since his humour is only sometimes on show, I am often laughing at him – and yet, out of mawkish brutalism, through my irony, rise the most affecting scenes I've ever seen: the beach shot in *Cobra Verde*; the clouds in *Heart of Glass*; the wandering penguin in *Encounters*; above all the final shot of *My Best Fiend*.)

These diaries show him to be more thoughtful, rational, contrived and poetic than I had guessed. His sincere interest in the locals' territorial plight, his physical participation in the set construction and management, his absorption in the suffering of jungle animals, his incongruous bright-eyed interest in mathematics, his astonishing codependency with Kinski, are all deeply disarming. The prose takes some getting used to, since the plain unflinching goth awe of it is the kind of thing we are primed to mock. It is well worth acclimating to: each entry is both bleak and hilarious, and the translation is rapturous and pellucid. There is such a lot of death.

He certainly views the natural world right: as overwhelmingly a place of horrifying and pointless suffering, cooed over by rationalising pseudos from cars. There's not a lot of technical info here, or explanations of the crew's role or background; there's no timeline or context added; nor even very much about the film at all. But who cares? This is incredible as nature writing, dream journal, and logistical poetry.

5?/5.

- ***Preliminary Assessment of Linux for Safety-Critical Systems*** (2002) by RH Pierce. UK government commissioned this to sanction what was happening already. Clears it for SIL1 and SIL2, and SIL3 is said to be accessible after some more testing. Because this report has a very specific aim, it actually provides a

very clear introduction to the Linux movement and the technicalities of OS safety, both.

3/5.

- Reread: ***What the Hell are You Doing?: The Essential David Shrigley*** (2006). Hilarious, abject, shoddy magical realism. Voices from the last bus and the dawn of time, from dank cells and strip-lit service stations. Against institutional art and other pretences, and against indifference, and against no fun.

5/5.

- ***Authorship and the Art of David Lynch*** (2012) by Antony Todd. Pompous and shallow, with less intellectual content than the Rotten Tomato summaries of the films, let alone the films. (“*Chapter One: Towards a Textual Historicity.*”) Wields critical-theory Freudian shite to justify writing a book without any real discussion of the films, or the films' themes, or even any real biographical aspersion of Lynch-as-seen-in-his-films. Instead there is second-hand gossip dressed up as historical context and post-structuralist intertextuality (“Jaussian reception theory”: the discussion of reviews, ad campaigns, corporate manoeuvring).

Materialism (in critical theory): the position that both artwork and authors are irrelevant to the study of the artwork.

Let us, then, register modern auteurism in a reception practice whereby the authored film can compete for the reader's attention in a coming together of inter- and extra-textual determinations through which the modern film spectator composes the aesthetic text for herself or himself...

I'm not suggesting Todd is dishonest, or intentionally vague: instead, I think film studies has deluded this man into thinking he's doing intellectual work when he shuffles these words around.

1/5.

Note for your calibration of my opinion: I was very much looking forward to this book, and so I fell far. Also it's been a while since I read any academic Arts work that didn't strike me as hollow and

fatally decoupled from the work at hand. Let alone its coupling to the world. I will strive to cherry-pick in future.

- **Neptune's Brood** (2013) by Charlie Stross. Extended essay on the macroeconomics of space bitcoin and the Graeberian lightness of debt. Also dead good breakneck fun, as always. Protagonist is a historian of finance and a gentle soul in ravenous space capitalism. Set in the Saturn's Children world, with perhaps too much in common with that book (a powerful, psychotic matriarch antagonist; economic pressure as main plot driver; a serially manipulated and unviolent lead; space travel is shit). But good.

Note: He devises a species of terrifying scavenger, the ‘Bezos worm’, which fall upon the wounded in vast packs, and incorporate their prey into their intestinal lining, to steal their genetic essence and thereby ease future cannibalism.

3*/5. [Library]

- Aloud: **Sentenced to Life** (2015) by Clive James. Poems written in the lengthening tail-end of his prognosis, mostly to his estranged wife. Plain, Classical, of cycles and renewal, death as travel, and the similarity of ends to beginnings.

*Her sumptuous fragments still went flying on
In my last hours, when I, in a warm house,
Lay on my couch to watch them coming close,
Her proofs that any vision of eternity
Is with us in the world, and beautiful
Because a mind has found the way things fit
Purely by touch. That being said, however,
I should record that out of any five
Pictures by Kogan, at least six are fakes.*

Some rage: against Assad and his torturers, against unreflective environmentalism, against Laura Riding or Gabriele d'Annunzio. Black humour relieving the strain of being wise and stoical.

*On a hard day in the Alhambra
The Sultan sent an apple
To the virgin of his choice.*

*The logo on your Macbook
Is an echo of the manner
In which Alan Turing killed himself.*

Wanted to love this, but it is just good. It really picks up halfway through. His simple ones about e.g. Oxfam shops / action films are better than the cosmic ones. Best are ‘Plot Points’, ‘Echo Point’, ‘Transit Visa’, ‘Event Horizon’, ‘Nature Programme’, ‘The Emperor’s Last Words’.

4/5. [Library]

- **Object-Oriented Software Engineering** (2005) by Lethbridge and Laganiere. Software engineering is just a fancy word for design. It consists in getting a long way away from your code – procedural, data, architectural, set-theoretic abstraction – which I resented at first, but which is far more important than it looks. UML is a rigorous, machine-readable graphical logic. Rather than lines of code, design patterns are the real units of serious work. This book is exoteric to fuck (infected by the ‘stakeholder’ bureaucratese bug) and occasionally the examples are not illustrative, but all right.

3/5. [Library]

- **The Decline and Fall of Science** (1976) by Celia Green. Sullen Objectivist parapsychologist rant, aimed at convincing someone to give her £10m (“Considering how much there is to be done in this subject, that much would be reasonable”). Somehow this blared forth from elite trappings, Hamish Hamilton; it certainly bears an old, old Oxbridge sneer.

In the early days of psychical research, that is to say, during the short period before the volume of activity in the subject petered out on account of the decline of civilisation...

Chapter 1 is “The Decline and Fall of Civilisation”. 6 and 7 get the declines of physics and medicine out of the way in 22 pages. Chapter 14: “Psychokinesis”. Chapter 17: “Conclusion, for the Particular Attention of Millionaires”. So I admit I picked this up to laugh at it: the first page has Green declare herself an unappreciated genius, followed by pages of largely inapt aphorisms:

When people talk about ‘the sanctity of the individual’ they mean ‘the sanctity of the statistical norm’.

Women are the last people to entrust with children. Those who have repressed their own aspirations will scarcely be tolerant of the aspirations of others.

‘Social justice’ – the expression of universal hatred.

(Though I like ‘Democracy: the idea that everyone should have an equal opportunity to obstruct everybody else.’)

2/5, extra point for her sheer force of aristocratic woo. [University! Library]

- ***The Philosophical Programmer*** (1998) by Daniel Kohanski. Damn! Would have been fantastic to read first, before the stress and sheer pace of *How To Program* overcame the space I had in mind for *What It Is To Program*. Gentle, brief, happy introduction to the totally basic elements and history. Not abstract or sweeping enough for its stated aims, though. See Floridi for the grand social/phenomenological bits, Dennett and Minsky for its relevance to all thought.

3/5, but 4 for noobs. [Library]

- Reread: ***This is Water*** (2006) by David Foster Wallace. I’ve seen a whole lot of ‘hatin’ on DFW lately – here, here, here, here. But who else marries the syrupy plain with the thrilling theoretical arcane? Could *anyone* fail to understand the obvious, masked point of this little lecture? (Roughly just: “It requires constant work to direct oneself from egotism and irritation; this work is the point of education and the essence of maturity.”)

The audience titters throughout the recording; this grates on me. It’s the forced, knowing laughter you hear in theatres (or wherever large groups of upper-middle class people gather). I submit that it’s this feature of DFW’s audience that Ellis and TLP hate. I don’t know if reading DFW makes me any less self-obsessed and disdainful, but actually it feels like it might.

5/5. [Here]

JUNE 2015

- *Aloud: Human Chain* (2010) by Seamus Heaney. As ever, it's of hands, eels, parents, wakes, digging, kennings, regret, the RUC, Cuchulain, and Caesar. Fully half are in memoriams. You have to be brave or famous to write this plainly. Plainness can be mistaken for absence of technique – ‘here, I could do that’ – but here it is very, very obvious that I could not. Feel your tongue:

*It's winter at the seaside where they've gone
For the wedding meal. And I am at the table,
Uninvited, ineluctable.
A skirl of gulls. A smell of cooking fish.
Plump dormant silver. Stranded silence. Tears.
Their bibbed waitress unlids a clinking dish.
And leaves them to it, under chandeliers.
And to all the anniversaries of this
They are not ever going to observe
Or mention even in the years to come.
And now the man who drove them here will drive
Them back, and by evening we'll be home.*

Best are ‘A Herbal’, ‘Chanson d’Aventure’, ‘Miracle’, ‘Loughanure’, and ‘Route 110’, an odyssey about buying a second-hand copy of the Aeneid and then trying to go home.

4*/5. [Library]

- *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* (2011) by David Foster Wallace. What to say? Fifty fragments: unintegrated, contradicting, only some of the time amazing. Themes are as you’d expect: self-consciousness, freedom, duty, routine; the awful effects of unconstrained self-consciousness, freedom, duty and routine; the death of American civics; ‘the horror of personal smallness and

transience'; the repugnance we feel for pure virtue; the extraordinary fires that are alight beneath some people. But, where in Jest these were expressed through (burdened with) drug slang and pharmacology, valley-speak, advertising dreck, and calculus, here we get accountancy minutiae, surely intended to repulse us. Yet the style of most of them is far less mannered than his finished work, which style we might call Post-Doc Valley-Girl

The reason for this public ignorance is not secrecy. The real reason why US citizens were/are not aware of these conflicts, changes and stakes is that the whole subject of tax policy and administration is dull. Massively, spectacularly dull.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of this feature. Consider, from the Service's perspective, the advantages of the dull, the arcane, the mind-numbingly complex. The IRS was one of the very first government agencies to learn that such qualities help to insulate them against public protest and political opposition, and that abstruse dullness is actually a much more effective shield than is secrecy. For the great disadvantage of secrecy is that it's interesting.

Institutional tedium – the default state for developed-world adults – is a profoundly important thing to address, one it takes (still will take) an unusual mind to illuminate for us. But *Pale King* is actually not a Kafkan tale of the monstrous and growing horror of bureaucracy; actually he is deeply impressed and convinced of the value of the people and their work, in large part because of its inhumane strictures, and lack of glory, and unpopularity. "Big Q is whether IRS is to be essentially a corporate entity or a moral one." (Though if 'corporate' is there read merely as meaning 'maximising', the distinction can be a misleading one.)

To me, the really interesting question is why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention. Why we recoil from the dull. Maybe it's because dullness is intrinsically painful; maybe that's where phrases like 'deadly dull' and 'excruciatingly dull' come from. But there might be more to it. Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way... I can't think anyone really believes that today's so-called 'information society' is just about information. Everyone knows it's about something else, way down.

I tried to read them as short stories rather than chapters. This half-works. Actually the entire book was an intentionally fruitless setup – the major agonists all off-stage and everyone else just enduring. Stand out bits here. A couple of

intentionally unconvincing first-person authorial inserts – “I, David Wallace, social security no...” – which affirm the reality of the garish IRS underbelly he fabricates, puts him in the scene. Fragment #8 is a horrifying Cormac McCarthy lyric, childhood psychosis. One (#22) is a hundred-page monologue, the character repetitive, rambling and conceited, but also the most developed and affecting. Of this wreckage we are given to read. What to say? That you’d have to love him, that you should.

X / 5. [Library]

- **Introduction to Speech and Language Processing** (2005) by Coleman.
- ‘A Tutorial on Hidden Markov Models’ (1989), by Lawrence Rabiner.
Hidden Markov models are interesting: they let us get at things around corners. In my case, the corner is linguistic accommodation.
- **Eloquent Javascript** (2011) by Marijn Haverbeke. Verbose, thoughtful and extremely well-implemented. Part of a growing tradition of artful tech textbooks – Why’s Poignant Guide to Ruby, Learn You a Haskell, . Hides the specific things you need to know about JS – its mad liberal syntax, semicolon insertion, functors, – among a My First Programming. But no harm in seeing what one knows already.

4/5, 4* for noobs. [Here]

- **The Green Isle of the Great Deep** (1944) by Neil Gunn. Odd anti-rationalist fantasy on the model of TH White. (What’s the word for the pre-Tolkien, pre-swords-and-sorcery model of fantasy?) Everything is oblique, from the discussion of Auschwitz at the start, to the Kafkan bureaucracy seated in a pastoral landscape. I admire his portrayal of the totalitarian Administrators: when defeated, they are not destroyed but put in their place. There are also passages like this:

...to achieve the blessed intention, something practical had to be done. Things could not be left in the hands of the Administrators. In the story of man, that had been tried times without number and always it had failed. (The revolving Earth, pitted with its tragedies, cried in a far voice from the

midst of space: ‘You cannot leave me to politicians.’)

But administrators are needful, are necessary. To fulfil their high function they work with the cunning of the head. But to leave destiny to the head is to leave the trigger to the finger. And after the trigger is pulled they cry above the desolation – (and the desolation was terrible to behold): ‘We will make a new earth, and share the fruits thereof and the fishes of the deeps.’ But what happens?

The fruit is processed and the salmon is canned.

A good children’s book: pure of heart and finely weighted. But too didactic.

3/5.

- ***John Dies at the End*** (2005) by David Wong. There was a time, as yet unnamed, before self-conscious Social Media but after broadband. It can be sketched out in its totems: LimeWire, ytmnd, Something Awful. In this time was JDatE born. Slapstick body horror, and you’ll know already what you’ll make of it from that description. This is scarier than it is funny, but not a huge amount of either. I’m very happy that he was anointed and raised by the internet, that the gatekeepers were evaded. But.

2/5.

- ***American Hippopotamus*** (2013) by Jon Mooallem. Blasted through this nonfiction novella with great delight; so much astonishing Victorian detail, so much damn fun. The story of two hardcore spies, American and Boer, who ranged over the eC20th, blowing things up and meeting presidents and dissing Churchill’s fitness level and mining by hand as an anti-fascist action and striking oil and maybe killing lords – who campaigned together to bring an invasive species in to eat another invasive species and introduce a new meat animal to America. Duquesne to Burnham:

To my friendly enemy, the greatest scout in the world, whose eyes were the vision of an empire. I craved the honour of killing him, but failing that, I extend my heartiest admiration.

So damn fun, and, in the last instance, also deep. Mooallem reproaches us for having clicked on *American Hippopotamus* to make fun of the men. But:

Rather than diversify and expand our stock of animals, we developed ways to raise more of the same animals in more places. Gradually, that process led to the factory farms and mass-confinement operations we have today—a mammoth industry whose everyday practices and waste products are linked to all kinds of dystopian mayhem, from the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, to a spate of spontaneous abortions in Indiana, to something called blue baby syndrome, in which infants actually turn blue after drinking formula mixed with tap water that's been polluted by runoff from nearby feedlots. That same runoff also sloshes down the Mississippi River to its mouth, pooling into one of the world's biggest aquatic dead zones, seven or eight thousand square miles large at times...

These aren't problems that America created so much as ones we've watched happen—consequences of our having ducked other, earlier problems by rigging together relatively unambitious solutions that seemed safe enough. We answered the Meat Question. But there were more meat questions ahead.

Simple, thoughtful, astonishingly well-written.

4*/5.

- **Consciousness and the Novel** (2005) by David Lodge. A grab-bag as friendly and sensible as you'd expect. He's certainly much, much more trustworthy than other humanities academics, on either title topic. Main question: what implications do the new cognitive and biological sciences have for yr subjective life and art? How damaged would the great novels be by decentring and anti-human stuff? (Aside from the long and thoughtful opening essay, inspired in large part by Dennett, we are given a jovial bunch to consider: Dickens, Forster, Amis elder and younger, James, Updike, with Roth and Kierkegaard the outliers.) Closing interview, with Craig Raine, is seriously stilted, but it's because he doesn't want to play the invited game, waffling deeply. And so this book: refusing to hide from the reality of the mind, and succeeding in holding up books against that reality against great odds.

4/5.

*And did I seek
the Kingdom?
Will the
Kingdom
Come? The idea
of it there,
Behind its scrim
since font and
fontanel,*

*Breaks like light
or water,
Like giddiness I
felt at the old
story
Of how he'd turn
away from the
motif,*

*Spread his legs,
bend low, then
look between
them
For the mystery
of the hard and
fast
To be unveiled,
his inverted face
contorting.*

*Like an arse-
kisser's in some
vision of the
damned
Until he'd
straighten, turn
back, cock an
eye
And stand with
the brush at
arm's length,
readying.*

– Seamus Heaney



(c) Grace Witherell (2015)

humans have thrived by turning every need — every vulnerability — into something high in its own right. Shelter becomes architecture. Reproduction gets wrapped in romance and love... think of all the cultural significance and artistry and labor that goes into [eating]. I wanted to bring that same creative power and meaning-making to death...

– of BJ Miller

Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not building dams or spinning webs, but telling stories – more particularly concocting the story we tell others, and ourselves, about who we are... we do not consciously and deliberately figure out what narratives to tell and how to tell them; like spiderwebs, our tales are spun but for the most part we don't spin them...

– Daniel Dennett

Unintentional quarterly theme is *technology as the future of control and of freedom*. So a lot of political sci-fi; nice brain-cooling fun while I hammered out a machine learning thesis way too late. I am not a 'solutionist', nor a techno-utopian about politics, nor a proto-guru. There is *something* wrong with the full anti-political technocratic air (this long thing does it smugly but not unfairly), which the Venkatesh Rao piece suffers. Even so, I trust nerds (sci-fi writers, devs, EAs) to handle speculative and theoretical politics more than I trust littératateurs or traditional radicals; the latter too seldom have a sense of what has fundamentally changed about the world in the last 60 years, and little chance of grasping what is newly possible.

(I am constantly tempted to expand this scoring system, to give many separate scores for each book (e.g. "stylishness", "fun", "overall truth", "quality of justification", and well as "durability") and then sum them. Something holds me back; perhaps mere taste. Re-readability is not the only book virtue but it's the most significant single book virtue, the one that keeping a reading list is most concerned with. Signposts, breadcrumbs, flares for my future.)

JULY 2015

- ***Intuition Pumps*** (2012) by Daniel Dennett. A self-help book! in the form of a set of tricks and tools for good non-routine cognition. But it's utterly personable and scientifically charged, and a defence of naturalist semantics, mind, 'free' will, and philosophy itself, to boot. He's so much more subtle than he's given credit for – for instance, a large theme here is the central role of imagination in science and the other potent sorts of thought. I confess that I simply can't conceive of some of his positions (e.g. 'qualia' being non-necessary illusions produced by theory); but one of the book's burning points is that this may well be a failing of my person, and not his philosophy. Also a meta-philosophy:

By working with scientists I get a rich diet of fascinating and problematic facts to think about, but by staying a philosopher without a lab or a research grant, I get to think about all the theories and experiments and never have to do the dishes.

A good library has all the good books. A great library has all the books. If you really want to understand a great philosopher, you have to spend some time looking at the less great contemporaries and predecessors that are left in the shadows of the masters.

Every book of his I read increases my respect and his breadth. (Though note Galen Strawson's rebuke to the narrativist theory of identity, 4* here.)

4*/5

- ***Market Forces*** (2004) by Richard Morgan. So totally a book of its time: of cinematic *Adbusters*ish rage and paranoia. By 2086, military aid has been fully privatised, making a free market out of unilateral political force:

All over the world, men and women still find causes worth killing and dying for. And who are we to argue with them? Have we lived in their circumstances? Have we felt what they feel? No. It is not our place to say if

they are right or wrong. At Shorn Conflict Investments, we are concerned with only two things. Will they win? And will it pay?

His economic naivete is balanced by his writing's characteristic virtues: pace, pro-social rage (here, wifebeaters and Nazis suffer retributive atrocities), cool uncliched weapons. In a rarity for SF, Morgan *underestimates* the rate of tech growth (by his 2086): for instance, their drones are much larger and more limited in application than ours are already. Crass and flashy, but politically and psychologically ambitious. I have read everything Morgan has written and will return. Full review below.

3*/5. [Library]

- ‘**Non-Materialist Physicalism**’ (2015) by David Pearce. (Or, as he subtitles it in grand C17th fashion: *The Hard Problem of Consciousness Solved; the Explanatory Gap Closed; the Binding Problem Tamed; Zombies Banished; and Physicalism Saved.*) A detailed call for a experimental test of panpsychism; also an alternative quantum theory of mind to Orch-OR. So exciting! Not many writers make me feel I am on the edge of the world and world to come.

4*/5.

- ***Island*** (1962) by Aldous Huxley. His last book: a half-rational vehicle for his late contrarian mystical worldview; in fact it reads as his making amends for the vivid bioconservative paranoia of *Brave New World*. It certainly handles the same themes, simply inverted in their consequences: we see drugs as *enablers* of enlightenment; a much healthier view of suffering, as a pointless trap; a surprisingly pragmatic view of genetic engineering; and a very balanced view of civilisation and economic development.

So: he constructs a Taoist-Hindu-Buddhist utopia which mostly avoids primitivism and annoying mysticism for a sustainable East plus West non-industrial modernity. It's not my idea of paradise, but other people's utopias usually aren't. Moreover, it is a *doomed* utopia nestled in nasty 1950s international political economy. The animating enemy of *Island* is not the authoritarian consequences of technology, but what Scott Alexander calls Moloch: the forces of self-fulfilling inevitability and destructive competition.

Protagonist is a mirror of John the Savage: an open-minded liar and shill, a fallen outsider who manages to undermine the utopia he infiltrates. Huxley himself is the model for him: in fact we can see Will's journey from cynical aestheticism to materialist spirituality as autobiography in allegory. The mystic character, Rani, is amazing: an enraging theosophical flake. This reflects well on Huxley's own weirdness: the Rani is as far from traditional organised religion as Huxley is from her.

Given the times and his project, lots of Huxley's worldview have become clichés: e.g. "you forget to pay attention to what's happening. And that's the same as not being here and now ". The prose is arch and syrupy but I like it. (*BNW* is saddled by the air of a smug jeremiad. *Island* is every bit as didactic but nowhere near as smug.) It's chock-full of bad poetry though. I love his use of reported speech to denote characters he disrespects: this saves him the bother of writing it and us the bother of reading and makes a conspiracy of us and Huxley:

He turned to Will and treated him to a long and flowery farewell.

In polysyllables, Mr Bahu hedged diplomatically. On the one hand, yes; but on the other hand, no. From one point of view, white; but from a different angle, distinctly black.

Pala's structure is cool but not at all radical enough to solve what is wrong with us, I think – technology is controlled very carefully and considered one of the 'dozens' of fronts to aid people on. (Hypnotherapy and tantra are given way more credit than they deserve, for instance.) Is "one-third" of suffering intrinsic? I look forward to science seeing if that is the case. I elect Huxley into the hall of fame of people who make a very popular error and later recant to no acclaim. (Niels Bohr (and his memetically dominant false model), Frank Jackson, André Gide, Bertrand Russell,)

4/5. [Library]

* Can we call a *novel* mistaken? As a whole, not in some particular claim of a character. 'Misguided', or ideologically harmful, maybe.

AUGUST 2015

- **Selected Letters of Philip Larkin** (1992), ed. Anthony Thwaite. In which his sheer vulgarity and vitality show through. Letters were a massive part of his life, the only time he was (able to be) properly social or affectionate. Only shows his letters, not the interlocutors, which amplifies the grim humour and passive aggression. Couldn't believe how big a DH Lawrence fan he is.

How little our careers express what lies in us, and yet how much time they take up. It's sad, really.

I hate it when you go, for the dreary failure & selfishness on my part it seems to symbolise - this is nothing to do with Maeve, you've always come before her; it's my own unwillingness to give myself to anyone else that's at fault - like promising to stand on one leg for the rest of one's life...

My great trouble, as usual, is that I lack desires. Life is to know what you want, & to get it. But I don't feel I desire anything. I am unconvinced of the worth of literature. I don't want money or position. I find it easier to abstain from women that sustain the trouble of them & the creakings of my own monastic personality.

Silliness abounds, particularly in the spells where he and Amis are railing against the world:

Now there can only be don't normally take anyone over 55, like to do a few tests if you don't mind, am returning it because it isn't really up to your own high standard, afraid I must stop coming Mr Larkin hope you find another cleaning lady to

AAAARRRRGHGHGHGHGH

Totally obsessed with the passage of time throughout his entire life.

I'm terrified of the thought of time passing (or whatever is meant by that phrase) whether I 'do' anything or not. In a way I may believe, deep down, that doing nothing acts as a brake on 'time's - it doesn't of course. It merely adds the torment of having done nothing, when the time comes when it really doesn't matter if you've done anything or not.

His existential decline is so steep through the 70s that I actually couldn't finish, it was too sad.

4/5. [Library]

- **The HTK Book** (1989-2009). Dry as hygroscopic sand: the handbook for a powerful set of free open-source linguistics software. I based almost my whole MSc thesis on this software; I am not all that proud of the results, but I was thrown into a whole bunch of new things at once: acoustic analysis, phonetics, social signal processing, machine learning, Python, and eventually surfaced with a stronger mind. HTK (the Hidden Markov Modelling ToolKit) is the pre-eminent speech recognition software for linguistics research - that is, top-flight language modelling tools are freely available to all. But the barriers to anyone making use of this incredible research tool are unbelievably high: even if you know a decent amount about finite-state machines and statistics and scripting, you have to learn HTK's internal computer language, parse this manual, which assumes postgraduate linguistics, and then run your first halting attempts through a fully unforgiving DOS system in which missing newlines and unaligned file structures cause hours of debugging. We are so close to being able to understand ourselves and the fully specific linguistic ecology we and our friends inhabit, but because of bad design and writing, we are not there at all.

2/5.

- Sort of re-read: **Rationality: from A-Z** (2015) by Eliezer Yudkowsky. In which a very modern and rigorous form of rationalism is promoted, with buckets of scientific insights and a few genuine innovations* unified into a grand theory of reason and action: probability theory and decision theory. An ongoing concern. Yudkowsky's writing suffers a particular phenomenon: we incorporate the ideas, but everyone begrudges the insight they glean from him and forget they ever thought otherwise. This is perhaps because his site laboured under a shallow pall of nerdiness (fan-fiction and Streisanding), a status deficit which prevents people from acceding the ideas their actual merit. His dismissive attitude to high-status people and ideas also drives a lot of people crazy, sometimes making them unable to care if the ideas are right. So we minimise his contribution to the life of the new mind, some of the brightest prospects in the dark world. This is unfair but the new mind is the thing, and much broader than him already.

5/5.

* Yudkowsky's new ideas (not the mere popularisations):

- The abstract research chain into FAI: i.e. logical uncertainty, tiling, corrigibility, value learning. The leading academic textbook on AI gives a full page to his ideas.

- Pascal's mugging (see final footnote here).
 - A new completeness theorem in probabilistic logic, discussed by a big-name mathematical physicist here.
 - The term "Friendly AI"
 - Probably the first to tie the Jaynesian probability calculus plus the Heuristics and Biases program plus rule-utilitarianism.
- ***The God That Failed: Six Studies in Communism*** (1949) by Silone, Koestler, Fischer, Gide, Wright, and Spender. Remarkable accounts of conversion by the most independent and earliest ex-Communists. From where we stand, it is easy to write off their conversion because, well, "*obviously Stalinism was fucked*" - but many of the most brilliant people kept clinging on to it through Kronstadt, through Pitchfork, through the Volksaufstand, through Hungary, through Prague, and even today (Carr never acknowledged the genocides; Hobsbawm knew the death tolls and kept betting on red; Grover Furr is still teaching) *even in Russia*.

Persuasion may play a part in a man's conversion; but only the part of bringing to its full and conscious climax a process which has been maturing in regions where no persuasion can penetrate. A faith is not acquired; it grows like a tree.

Foreword, by what today's standards make a peculiarly intellectual MP, is careful to set itself apart from the red-bashing of the time and lay out its humane purpose: to understand the emotional appeal of communism (: a religious one) and the disillusionment that the very most independent communists had already suffered.

no one who has not wrestled with Communism as a philosophy, and Communists as political opponents, can really understand the values of Western democracy. The Devil once lived in Heaven, and those who have not met him are unlikely to recognize an angel when they see one... The Communist novice, subjecting his soul to the canon law of the Kremlin, felt something of the release which Catholicism also brings to the intellectual, wearied and worried by the privilege of freedom.

Silone's testimony about the Comintern's sick irrationality would be enough to make the book prescient. Richard Wright's account of the parties outside of Russia is another really chilling bit: the rot was deep and wide. This was my great-grandfather's copy.

5?/5.

(Form warning: Arthur Koestler was himself a monstrous man.)

SEPTEMBER 2015

- ***The Book of Disquiet*** (1912-1935) by Fernando Pessoa. Astonishing. A long series of eventless autobiographical sketches about being beautifully self-obsessed while working a shit job in a shit town. About a mind whose uniqueness was invisible during his life; about what we now call neuroatypicality; about everyday aesthetics. His obsessions are a cute fatalism, his inadequacy, nothingness and loneliness, but almost every passage is wise or funny or beautiful. I catch no despair off him. Shite into gold. Like Larkin if Larkin were likeable; like Montaigne if he were terser and darker. This paperback is a super-slim selection of the full chaotic archive he left behind. Ah! floreat inertia, the worker-poet distinctive and supreme. I read this while on a 22-hour international journey: unsleeping, undrinking, unreal; I prescribe the same conditions for you when you read him.

5?/5 [Kristi]

- ***The Master and Margarita*** (1940) by Mikhail Bulgakov. *Faust* in Moscow with laffs and a less-straightforward moral; also a solemn and harrowing Passion play; also a revenge play on the various apparatchiks and shill artists that made Bulgakov's life a constant question mark. I loved book one, in which the devil upends Stalinist control with seances, magic tricks, telegram lulz, and horrible trolling of only somewhat venal people.

Love leaped out in front of us like a murderer in an alley leaping out of nowhere, and struck us both at once. As lightning strikes, as a Finnish knife strikes!

It has a sweet fairytale air over and above the murders and the Satanic chaos.

Follow me reader! Who told you that there is no true, faithful, eternal love in this world! May the liar's vile tongue be cut out!

Was wondering if it's a Christian novel, but the view of Christ is heretical to all balls. Yeshua to Pilate:

In fact, I'm beginning to fear that this confusion will go on for a long time. And all because [Mark] writes down what I said incorrectly.

3*/5. [Kristi]

- **Glasshouse** (2006) by Charlie Stross. Sickly-satisfying but blunt satire on memory, gender and the dark side of memes. A bunch of polymorphous, polyamorous, post-scarcity posthumans volunteer for a closed-system experiment replicating the strictures of 1990s Nacirema, and are quite rightly appalled by the prison of social norms and physical limitations. (Not to mention the sinister panopticon modifications of the experimenters, with a public point-scoring table of conformism and no contraception.) The space-opera frame (a software virus that censors people's minds) is good too, wielding the deepest creepiness: brainwashing which actually works.

I've been thinking that maybe I lucked out with him - there's potential for abuse in this 'atomic relationship' thing...

Time is a corrosive fluid, dissolving motivation, destroying novelty, and leaching the joy from life. But forgetting is a fraught process, one that is prone to transcription errors and personality flaws. Delete the wrong pattern, and you can end up becoming someone else. Memories exhibit dependencies, and their management is one of the highest medical art forms.

Where would dictators be without our compliant amnesia? Make the collective lose its memory, you can conceal anything.

At moments like this I hate being an unreconstructed human - an island of thinking jelly trapped in a bony carapace, endless milliseconds away from its lovers, forced to squeeze every meaning through a low-bandwidth speech channel. All men are islands, surrounded by the bottomless oceans of unthinking night.

I love him for his quiet use of the technical for emotional ends, as when two characters "merge their deltas". The most interesting sci-fi writer alive? No; Ted Chiang. But still.

4/5. [Library]

- **Nexus** (2011) by Ramez Naam. Deeply unsubtle bio-libertarian thriller. Tom Clancy plus software plus anti-statism plus globalisation. Lots of ideas; Naam knows enough about code and brain-machine interfaces to make gestures towards the big info-nano-tech turning point in our near-to-mid-future, and acknowledges the horrors it is likely to enable.

The Chandler Act (aka the Emerging Technological Threats Act of 2032) is the opening salvo in a new War on Science. To understand the future course of this war, one need only look at the history of the War on Drugs and the War on Terror. Like those two manufactured "wars", this one will be never-ending, freedom-destroying, counterproductive, and ultimately understood to have caused far more damage than the supposed threat it was aimed at ever could have.

Naam has a nice message:

Broad dissemination and individual choice turn most technologies into a plus. If only the elites have access, it's a dystopia..

But the cheap prose and action (and the abuse of Nietzsche) are too wearing, particularly coming right after Stross, a master thereof.

2/5. [Library]

- **Breaking Smart, 'Season' 1** (2015) by Venkatesh Rao. A grandiose low-res narrative covering all of history from the perspective of technology (or, rather, the perspective of the tech industry (or, rather, of the *solutionists*)) in 30,000 words. Rao is one of the big in-house theorists for Silicon Valley*, and this is reflected in his contagious enthusiasm for just how much is becoming possible so quickly, the degree to which this time actually is different ("Software is eating the world"). Second half of this season attempts to generalise software engineering ideas (Agile, forking,) to all human endeavour (...) Yeah, I hate the title phrase too. People got cross at him being pretentious about the format (long-form blog posts released in huge chunks, to binge on like a boxset) but I like it. Very exciting for techies, and readable for nontechies. just unreliable. Full review here.

4/5.

* See also Floridi, a deep but similarly narrative thinker. Compare them to Freud and Marx: wonderfully original but lacking justification.

- **To Save Everything, Click Here** (2013) by Evgeny Morozov. Sharp, original, and broad mismatch: an intellectual history of information technology, law, political economy, as well as an ok bit of polemical sociology and theory of Design. His targets are the '*solutionists*', those technocrat techies who derive from the half of the Enlightenment which became positivism. (It is roughly: the will to perfect things and people, plus theorism, plus economism, plus the sheer power and scope of modern software.) Morozov is, bluntly, afraid for us all because software is eating the world:

Imperfection, ambiguity, opacity, disorder and the opportunity to err, to sin: all of these are constitutive of human freedom, and any concentrated attempt to root them out will root out that freedom as well... we risk finding ourselves with a politics devoid of everything that makes politics desirable, with humans who have lost their basic capacity for moral reasoning, with lackluster cultural institutions that don't take risks and, most terrifyingly, with a perfectly controlled social environment that would make dissent not just impossible but possibly even unthinkable...

But I do not deserve the freedom to believe harmful falsehoods, nor the freedom to hide my errors behind ambiguity; nor the freedom to throw away resources which others need. And I don't want the freedom to waste my life. Technology is the only untried way of responding to our grave Darwinian inheritance of intolerance, selfishness, and irrationality. But Morozov makes his case well about the specific case of technologised politics. Full review here.

4*/5. [Library]

- **Constructions: Making Sense of Things** (1974) by Michael Frayn. Book of aphorisms, again glorifying unanalysed practice and the majority of the world which is beyond theory. Self-consciously Wittgensteinian (*PI*), as he declares repeatedly in the preface. This declaration is a shame, because it means that his

nice-enough notes on perception, knowledge and emotion are vastly, vastly overshadowed by the giant spectre he has called up; it's *PI* without the thought experiments and devastating reductios. But a nice supplement to it:

Look at your hand. Its structure does not match the structure of assertions, the structure of facts. Your hand is continuous. Assertions and facts are discontinuous.... You lift your index finger half an inch; it passes through a million facts. Look at the way your hand goes on and on, while the clock ticks, and the sun moves a little further across the sky.

(The brutal conservative relativism underpinning *PI* is, needless to say, not addressed either.)

3/5. [Library]

- '**Fuck Nuance**' (2015) by Kieran Healy. Exciting, drawling piece of methodology and philosophy from the first sociologist to impress me in a long time. It is a lot easier to believe that social science can be fixed when people like Healy are there, defying the field's stereotypes and clearly plotting a course in relation to other kinds of inquiry.

4*/5.

If anything's to be praised, it's most likely how the west wind becomes the east wind, when a frozen bough sways leftward, voicing its creaking protests, and your cough flies across the Great Plains to Dakota's forests. At noon, shouldering a shotgun, fire at what may well be a rabbit in snowfields, so that a shell widens the breach between the pen that puts up these limping awkward lines and the creature leaving real tracks in the white...

... and when "the future" is uttered, swarms of mice rush out of the Russian language and gnaw a piece of ripened memory which is twice as hole-ridden as real cheese. After all these years it hardly matters who or what stands in the corner, hidden by heavy drapes, and your mind resounds not with a seraphic "do," only their rustle. Life, that no one dares to appraise, like that gift horse's mouth, bares its teeth in a grin at each encounter. What gets left of a man amounts to a part. To his spoken part. To a part of speech.

... You reach for a shirt in a drawer and the day is wasted. If only winter were here for snow to smother all these streets, these humans; but first, the blasted green. I would sleep in my clothes or just pluck a borrowed book, while what's left of the year's slack rhythm, like a dog abandoning its blind owner, crosses the road at the usual zebra. Freedom is when you forget the spelling of the tyrant's name and your mouth's saliva is sweeter than Persian pie, and though your brain is wrung tight as the horn of a ram nothing drops from your pale-blue eye.

- Brodsky

Human deaths in Werner Herzog's filming diary



Fitzcarraldo is famous for being a film about a German maniac having locals drag a huge steamboat up a hill, made by a German maniac having locals drag a huge steamboat up a hill. Anthropological hearsay aside, his moral responsibility for the following is minimal; the region just seems to have been a very violent chaotic place, 1979-1981:

1. p.17 (a dead Peruvian soldier floats down the Pongo, eyes missing)
2. p.24 (a boat of 11 drunk men is lost in the rapids)
3. p.34 (he mourns Larisa Shepitko)
4. p.50 (a labourer falls off the ship in Iquitos and does not surface)
5. p.79 (remembers Kainz Ruepp, burned to death in his bed)
6. p.105 (a child in camp vomits itself to death)
7. p.120 (two in one day: dysentery in the morning and drowning at night)
8. p.168 (a cot death)
9. p.169 (recalls the ghoulish death of René Barrientos)
- 10.p.183 (recalls a drowned Swiss billionaire)
- 11.p.192 (two people shot by Amahuacas)
- 12.p.214 (recalls a child grabbing a pylon)
- 13.p.218 (find a body in the river, 'valiant swimmer')
- 14.p.227 (a boiler explodes; chunks of a man hit Herzog's hut)
- 15.p.261 (chuchupe bite; logger amputates his foot with a chainsaw)
- 16.p.264 (Asháninkas offer to kill Kinski)
- 17.p.287 (drug dealer found with his tongue cut out)

This is not to mention the animals' deaths, or his dreams about death, nor to say that all of these actually happened.



The real trouble with this world of ours is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor even that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of trouble is that it is nearly reasonable, but not quite. Life is not an illogicality; yet it is a trap for logicians. It looks just a little more mathematical and regular than it is; its exactitude is obvious, but its inexactitude is hidden; its wildness lies in wait.

– GK Chesterton

When you become frustrated with computers, please remember they are only cleverly-arranged sand. (When you become frustrated with people...)

– Gwern Branwen

I continue to overthink this model which has relevance only to me and even then only sometimes. This time: if I reread a book, *need* I then award it a 5/5, since it has *in fact* proven to be re-readable? Or only if I subsequently think I will read it again? This petty point reveals a somewhat less petty one: Is the above scale purely descriptive of durability - or what's to stop me from marking as 3 those low-status things I actually love?

OCTOBER 2015

- Twice aloud: **Rain** (2009) by Don Paterson. Wonderful: sincere, grotesque, solemn and shrugging; both elemental and goofy. Rhymes are delivered straight. Going by the ambient temperature and the coverage of light, Paterson lives very near to outer space.

*so for all that we are one machine
ploughing through the sea and gale
I know your impulse and design
no better than the keel the sail*

A unique, dry view of family life here; sneaking downstairs so as not to disturb them with your inexplicable angst. There's even a painfully goofy evocation of the mating call of the *Wire* magazine reader:

*Though I should confess that at times I find your habit of maxxing
the range with those bat-scaring frequencies ring-modulated
sine-bursts and the more distressing psychoacoustic properties
of phase inversion in the sub-bass frequencies somewhat taxing
you are nonetheless beautiful as the mighty Boards
themselves in your shameless organicising of the code.*

Which is best read as a scherzo. Half of it's written for a dead friend or in homage to lesser-known world poets; I rarely get poems like that. I don't know why I'm cavilling; this is the best collection I've read since... the last Don Paterson. Sentimental by his standards but bruising by poetry in general's. Teetering upright.

5?/5.

[Library]

- Aloud: **De Origine et situ Germanorum** (98) by Publius Tacitus, translated by Lamberto Bozzi (2012). Versified, and well, which makes even the boring bits about ploughs a pleasure. We had a long inconclusive discussion about how many of the claims are likely to be complete bullshit. Most interesting were: the prevalence of Greek myths among the Goths, and Tacitus' very early cross-cultural approval of *some* things.

*For when on chastity a woman cheats
She finds no mercy among the tribesmen
And cannot come by a husband again
No matter how young and rich and fair
Nobody laughs at these vices there
Or calls corruption a sign of the times.*

*Better still are the nations in those climes
Where virgins once only marry,
Willing for the right mate to tarry;
They take one husband, one body, one life -
No other thought or longing needs a wife
Who loves more than her man the married state...*

Nowhere near as racist as expected!

4/5.

- *J* (2014) by Howard Jacobson. Picked this up looking for a laugh, but my god. Of sordid, heartbroken, soft totalitarianism. The ineliminable danger of being different, and the specific danger for one difference in particular, which I'll let you discover. A companion piece to *The Book of Dave*, underneath Britain's (and humanity's) downside. Britain insulates itself against a self-inflicted atrocity by pushing away history and strongly banning modernist or pessimist ideas and people. So many despicable characters, like the art professor who defines everything by how little it reflects darkness or human brutality, 'primitivism' and 'degeneracy' (the irony being that this attitude, of art as mere grinning decoration, is itself a backslide from modernism, however empty and stupid much conceptual art is).

There was something uncanny about her, the seriousness with which she took her work, her obduracy, the size of her vocabulary, the lack of bounce in her hair, the flat shoes she wore, her failure often to get a joke, her way of overdoing sympathy as though understanding beat snogging.

The book (if not Jacobson) has a terrifying attitude towards bigotry: that it's never going away because it based on the deep need of exclusive identity, that bad marriages and ethnic atrocities appeal to something much deeper and more formal than what happens to have been socialised into us. 'Necessary Opposites', as he puts it:

'...Identity is nothing but illusion.'
'If it's all illusion, why has it caused so much misery?' ...

'Only when we have a different state to strive against do we have reason to strive at all. And different people the same. I am me because I am not her, or you. If we were all red earthworms there'd be no point in life. Identity is just the name we give to making ourselves distinct.'
'So you're saying it's irrelevant what our identities really are? As long as we assume one and fight against someone else's.'
'I'd say so, yes. Pretty much.'

'Isn't that a bit arbitrary?'
'Perhaps. But isn't everything? There's no design.'

It starts slow, give it 50 pages to worm its way.

4/5.

[Library]

- **Bitter Experience Has Taught Me** (2013) by Nicholas Lezard. Smooth, uninspired columns about bohemia (that is, bourgeois poverty), knitted together post hoc. I really like his book reviews - they are breezy, fearless, concise and yet unhurried. But this isn't very funny and not all that bitter, apart from in a few aperçus:

For a long time I believed anal sex was how lawyers were conceived.

His straddling class lines is interesting - his private schooling, Booker dinner invites, and going out with Allegra Mostyn-Owen clash well with his freeloading, bread-line salary (net of child support) and thieving of ashtrays from embassy mixers. I may be down on him because I used Pessoa as reference class and not Tim Dowling or Saki.

2/5.

[Library]

- **The Inimitable Jeeves** (1923) and **Carry On, Jeeves** (1925) by Pelham Grenville Wodehouse. Musical, uplifting, and still so, so funny. Each story draws on a *very* small pool of the exact same jokes (Jeeves hates a new piece of Wooster's wardrobe; little old lady Aunt Agatha is completely inexorable; shit gambling on unconventional sports, headgear is misappropriated, monsters are slain) and only four supporting characters (Pals, Uncles/Fathers-in-law, Aunts/Fiancees, Trade). But they only gain from the repetition somehow. Even here, in Wodehouse's smiling, sun-dappled imperial nest, there are echoes from reality: for instance The War as well as the spiky and still-reigning art it set alight:

*I suppose every chappie in the world has black periods in his life to which he can't look back without the smouldering eye and the silent shudder.
Some coves, if you can judge by the novels you read nowadays, have them practically all the time...*

"Were you in the [First World] War, Jeeves?"
"I dabbled in it to a certain extent, m'lord."

"I'm lonely, Jeeves."
"You have a great many friends, sir."
"What's the good of friends?"
"Emerson," I reminded him, "says a friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature, sir."
"Well you can tell Emerson from me next time you see him he's an ass."
"Very good, sir."

So frivolous it loops back round to profound.

3/5.**

- *PHP: A Fractal of Bad Design* (2012) by Alex 'Eevee' Munro. Half of the internet runs on PHP, a language which was not initially intended to be used for actual programs. This article, a long list of design criticisms and roaring frustration, is how I learned the language in the first place. It is indispensable, rigorous, and wise. I had to look up not a few terms in it, because I am not a computer scientist at all, but a sneaky back-stairs conversion boy.

All inquiry is hard; this might be because the mind was not initially intended to be used for real, permanent inquiry. But an often overlooked fact is that people *are* looking out for you; that is what half of all books *are*. In the tech world they cry lookout! a click away. If you care.

4*/5.

- Also: *Learning PHP, MySQL, JavaScript, CSS & HTML5* (2014) by Robin Nixon. I didn't read tech books during my first year. This was a serious mistake, not least because my brain is geared towards book-learning and depth-first top-down imposition of order. This is excellent for people starting from 0, but too slow for anyone with much practical experience.
4/5 for noobs which I am not quite, any more.
- *The Days of Surprise* (2014) by Paul Durcan. Disconcerting autobiographical fun; sometimes jolly to the point of childishness - gynaecologists! priests!. And

so full up with the Church, though teasing its pretensions and persisting brutalities. Here is the grand title poem, both *Under Milk Wood* for Ringsend his town and an occasional for Francis' coronation (who is, much like himself, "A figure of childlike passivity / As well as childlike authority"). A lovely man, clearly. When angry, he mocks his own anger. He does not denounce; instead he scolds. Also full of lovely banal lists:

I sat down under a recycling bin and wept – wept for joy and ecstasy and grief and anguish and the whole jing bang lot and Moses and Isabel Gilsenan and Johannes Scotus Eriugena and Georgie Hyde-Lees and Eimear McBride and Robert Heffernan and Katie Taylor and Christine Dwyer Hickey and Mo Farah and Roisin O'Brien and Joe Canning and Máire Logue and Rory and Columbanus and Enda and Fionnuala and Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Michael D. Higgins and – SABINA!

Best are "The Actors' Chapel"; and the title one.

3*/5.

[Library]

- ***The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*** (2010) by Philip Pullman. Or: "A Story." It's intentionally didactic, but that knowing intention doesn't stop it being annoying. Found myself reading it just to see what Pullman's next revision would be (e.g., Joseph being bullied into taking the teenage Mary for a wife).

"I remember him," said the blind man. "Jesus. He come here on the Sabbath, like a fool. The priests wouldn't let him heal anyone on Sabbath. He should've known that."

"But he did heal someone," said the lame man. "Old Hiram. You remember that. He told him to take up his bed and walk."

"Well what was the use of taking his living away? Begging was the only thing he knew how to do. You and your blether about goodness," he said, turning to Christ, "where's the goodness in throwing an old man out into the street without a trade, without a home, without a penny? Eh? That Jesus is asking too much of people."

Compassionate, subtler than the title suggests, dull.

2/5.

[Library]

- **In Praise of Love** (2010) by Alain Badiou. A leftist defence of marriage and a postmodern attempt at making love a big deal, ontologically speaking; beyond this initial frisson of meta-contrarian goodness, though: meh. Book's a bite-sized transcription of a formal literary talk - a genre which may well have no good instance. Here's the solitary pair of beautiful moments in an otherwise lukewarm bath of the history of philosophy of love and lazy sub-systematic Lacanian guesswork¹:

While desire focuses on the other, always in a somewhat fetishist[ic] manner, on particular objects, like breasts, buttocks and cock, love focuses on the very being of the other, on the other as it has erupted, fully armed with its being, into my life that is consequently disrupted and re-fashioned.

Love is an existential project: to construct a decentred world, from a point of view other than that of my mere impulse to survive and re-affirm my own identity... When I lean on the shoulder of the woman I love, and can see, let's say, the peace of a twilight over a mountain landscape, gold-green fields, the shadows of trees, black-nosed sheep motionless behind hedges and sun about to disappear behind craggy peaks, and know — not from the expression on her face, but from within the world as it is — that she is seeing the same world, and that this convergence is part of the world; that love constitutes precisely, at that very moment, the paradox of an identical difference, then love exists, and promises to continue existing. The fact is she and I are now incorporated into this unique subject, the subject of love that views the panorama of the world through the prism of our difference, so this world can be conceived, be born, and not simply represent what fills my own individual gaze. Love is always the possibility of being present at the birth of the world.

Clearer prose than you'd expect, though, isn't it?

3/5.

[Library]

¹ e.g. laziness: his claim about there being four "conditions" of philosophy, none of which are in fact necessary conditions, and one of which is good old dyadic love:

Anyone who doesn't take love as their starting-point will never discover what philosophy is about.

(Never mind, [Cavendish](#); oh well [Newton](#), sorry Schopenhauer; you tried real hard.)

NOVEMBER 2015

- **High Performance MySQL** (2004) by Zawodny and Balling. Databasing is all of the following: a hard precondition of almost all modern social activities; the high-stakes application of some very deep intellectual tortures; unutterably boring. This book's a nice intro to higher-level considerations: Query tuning (i.e. ask the question better), indexing (i.e. ask if it's been asked before), server tuning (ask a better person), replication (ask several people), benchmarking (ask trick questions). Not exactly chatty, but as engaging as you could expect:

The chapter concludes with recommendations for the long term care and feeding of your column indexes.

And it's not as gruesomely platform-specific as the title implies.

changing hardware might, in the best case, give you a 10-fold increase in speed. But tuning queries can often give you 1000-fold performance increase. Seriously.

Not deep, though: they namedrop B-trees and the query optimiser, but do not explain them beyond noting that they are very good and you should trust them. I haven't yet seen a bad O'Reilly book.

3*/5.

- **Don't Make Me Think: A Common-Sense Guide to Usability** (2006) by Steve Krug. Very clear, very humane. Underneath his smiley-grumpy homilies is an intuitive applied cognitive science. (He does give a couple of scientific citations, but the model has more to do with simple sympathetic cynicism. That is: Minimise text; have a strong visual hierarchy of size, prominence, clickability; have clear spaced sections of content on each page; keep page names literal; keep the background quiet; never write instructions - make it wordlessly, mindlessly obvious; use conventions unless you have a good reason not to. Which is obviously all good stuff, but overall I didn't like the dad-joke air.)
3/5.
- **Bad Pharma** (2013) by Ben Goldacre. Or - his preferred book title - *The Information Architecture of Medicine has Several Interesting Flaws, Many of*

Which Inflict Avoidable Harm on Patients, But All of Which are Amenable to Cost-Effective Change, Were There to be Adequate Public and Political Will. An empirically rigorous angry manifesto! <3

Here are all of the book's theses in one paragraph, which is another thing I love nonfiction writers doing:

Drugs are tested by the people who manufacture them, in poorly designed trials, on hopelessly small numbers of weird, unrepresentative patients, and analysed using techniques that are flawed by design, in such a way that they exaggerate the benefits of treatments. Unsurprisingly, these trials tend to produce results that favour the manufacturer. When trials throw up results that companies don't like, they are perfectly entitled to hide them from doctors and patients, so we only ever see a distorted picture of any drug's true effects. Regulators see most of the trial data, but only from early on in a drug's life, and even then they don't give this data to doctors or patients, or even to other parts of government. This distorted evidence is then communicated and applied in a distorted fashion.

In their forty years of practice after leaving medical school, doctors hear about what works ad hoc, from sales reps, colleagues and journals. But those colleagues can be in the pay of drug companies – often undisclosed – and the journals are, too. And so are the patient groups. And finally, academic papers, which everyone thinks of as objective, are often covertly planned and written by people who work directly for the companies, without disclosure. Sometimes whole academic journals are owned outright by one drug company. Aside from all this, for several of the most important and enduring problems in medicine, we have no idea what the best treatment is, because it's not in anyone's financial interest to conduct any trials at all. These are ongoing problems, and although people have claimed to fix many of them, for the most part they have failed; so all of these programs persist, but worse than ever, because now people can pretend that everything is fine after all.

[Low external validity] can make a trial completely irrelevant to real-world populations, yet it is absolutely routine in research, which is conducted on tight budgets, to tight schedules, for fast results, by people who don't mind if their results are irrelevant to real-world clinical questions. This is a quiet, dismal scandal. There's no dramatic newspaper headline, and no single killer drug: just a slow and unnecessary pollution of almost the entire evidence base in medicine.

Exactly as fair to pharma as it deserves and no more ("there is no medicine without medicines"). Business gimps sometimes use the term "thought leader", meaning powerful, original thinker. They usually use it spuriously; Goldacre actually is one. Please at least join AllTrials.

4*/5.

- Reread: **Use of Weapons** (1990) by Iain M Banks. The most tender and literary book in the *Culture* series. Zakalwe, the protagonist, is almost cartoonish in his piratical energy, but is saved from usual boring super-soldier effects by pathos of the *Bad Lieutenant* variety. Banks was always quite open about how didactic the sci-fi novels were; they are saved by his sheer inventiveness and the grand psychological realism amidst the technological fantasy.

Cough. What do humans have to offer, after the singularity? What skills are scarce? Banks' answer is: "a lack of scruples; excessive force; the ability to not care." We should be so lucky.

This scene had a large effect on me as a child:

'Of course I don't have to do this,' one middle-aged man said, carefully cleaning the table with a damp cloth. He put the cloth in a little pouch, sat down beside him. 'But look; this table's clean.'

He agreed that the table was clean.

"Usually," the man said. "I work on alien -- no offence -- alien religions; Directional Emphasis In Religious Observance; that's my specialty ... like when temples or graves or prayers always have to face in a certain direction; that sort of thing? Well, I catalogue, evaluate, compare; I come up with theories and argue with colleagues, here and elsewhere. But ... the job's never finished; always new examples, and even the old ones get re-evaluated, and new people come along with new ideas about what you thought was settled ... but," he slapped the table, "when you clean a table you clean a table. You feel you've done something. It's an achievement."

"But in the end, it's still cleaning a table."

"And therefore does not really signify on the cosmic scale of events?" the man suggested.

He smiled in response to the man's grin, "Well, yes."

"But then what does signify? My other work? Is that really important, either? I could try composing wonderful musical works, or day-long entertainment epics, but what would that do? Give people pleasure? My wiping this table gives me pleasure. And people come to a clean table, which gives them pleasure. And anyway" - the man laughed - "people die; stars die; universes die. What is any achievement, however great it was, once time itself is dead? Of course, if all I did was wipe tables, then of course it would seem a mean and despicable waste of my huge intellectual potential. But because I choose to do it, it gives me pleasure. And," the man said with a smile, "it's a good way of meeting people."

As did this, before I studied formal philosophy and received a resounding confirmation of it:

"Aw, come on; argue, dammit."

"I don't believe in argument," he said, looking out into the darkness.

"You don't?" Erens said, genuinely surprised. "Shit, and I thought I was the cynical one."

"It's not cynicism," he said flatly. "I just think people overvalue argument because they like to hear themselves talk."

"Oh well, thank you."

"It's comforting, I suppose." He watched the stars wheel, like absurdly slow shells seen at night: rising, peaking, falling... (And reminded himself that the stars too would explode, perhaps, one day.) "Most people are not prepared to have their minds changed," he said. "And I think they know in their hearts that other people are just the same, and one of the reasons people become angry when they argue is that they realize just that, as they trot out their excuses."

"Excuses, eh?"

"Yes, excuses," he said, with what Erens thought might just have been a trace of bitterness. "I strongly suspect the things people believe in are usually just what they instinctively feel is right; the excuses, the justifications, the things you're supposed to argue about, come later. They're the least important part of the belief. That's why you can destroy them, win an argument, prove the other person wrong, and still they believe what they did in the first place." He looked at Erens. "You've attacked the wrong thing."

But this was also before I got into technical pursuits which lend us hope that the above grim realism can be defeated by self-awareness, quantification, and epistemic care. Sometimes.

4/5. (By revealed preference, the series is 5/5.)

- **Pro Git** (2013) by Chacon and Neal Stephenson once hyperbolised the situation in OS choice as follows, hyperbolically:

Linux is right next door and is not a business at all. It's a bunch of RVs, yurts, tepees, and geodesic domes set up in a field and organized by consensus. The people who live there are making tanks. These are not old-fashioned, cast-iron Soviet tanks; these are more like the M1 tanks of the U.S. Army, made of space-age materials and jammed with sophisticated technology from one end to the other. But they are better than Army tanks. They've been modified in such a way that they never, ever break down, are light and maneuverable enough to use on ordinary streets, and use no more fuel than a subcompact car. These tanks are being cranked out, on the spot, at a terrific pace, and a vast number of them are lined up along the edge of the road with keys in the ignition. Anyone who wants can simply climb into one and drive it away for free.

This is overstated; Debian and Ubuntu, the chief consumer descendants, are as buggy as any other. As if you had to hook up the ignition system of the tank yourself, first.

But the very same people built Git, and *it* is a battle-tank. Fast, unbreakable and life-saving. Why hasn't it taken over the world, outside of tech industry? 1) most people don't need non-linear incremental backups; 2) the learning curve is bloody steep even for techies.

Entities that you need to know about to use Git without absurdity: the files, the working tree, the index, many local repositories, many remote repositories, 'remotes' (pointers to remote repositories), commits, treeishes (pointers to commits), branches, a stash

"git gets easier once you get the basic idea that branches are homeomorphic endofunctors mapping submanifolds of a Hilbert space."

— chi wai lau (@tabqwerty) March 9, 2011

This book covers so much of the internal detail, the gotchas, the customisability, and comparisons with other source-control systems that it was adopted as canonical docs by the official working group. Skip sections at will, but do have a go.

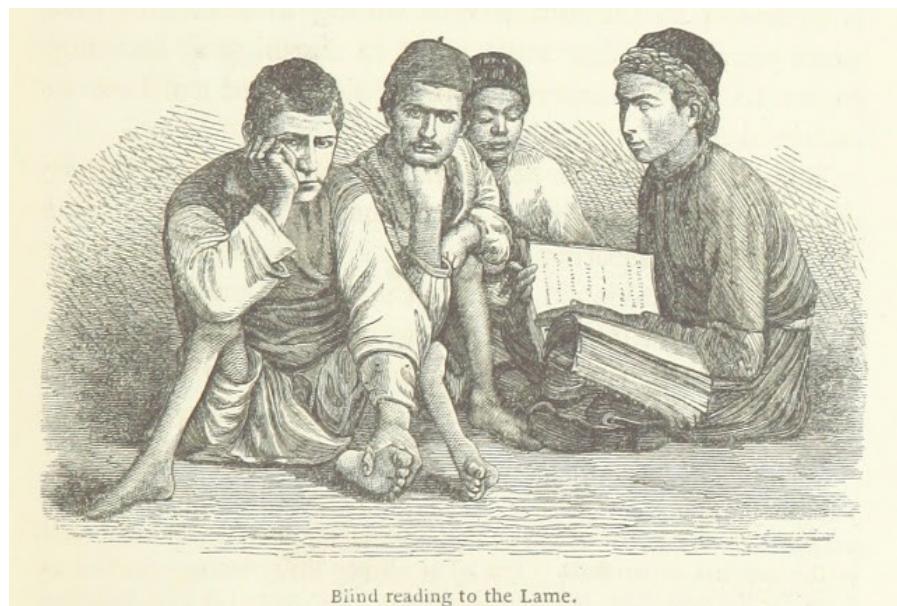
4/5.

- ***Brideshead Abbreviated: The Digested Read of the 20th Century*** (2013) by John Crace. A tasting platter of C20th literature (one book synopsised per year of the century), as well as very successful pastiche, as well as highbrow larfs, and also, occasionally, a tiny philosophical critique of revered writers. It is of course easy to make anything ridiculous if you compress it enough, but Crace is not cheap about it. He reserves most of his scorn for the obscene sensationalists (Ballard, Burroughs, Joyce, Kundera). Here is the main joke Crace makes in at least half of all of them, fourth-wall shamelessness:

*replied, “I’ll get away with shovelling any old garbage into print.
Take it from me, some suckers will one day call Naked Lunch a
masterpiece”.*

I read books about books because I'm a prig: my ignorance of these things makes me anxious. As a result of reading Crace, I can tell I won't read about fifty of the hundred. So, big gains, even if the larfs wear thin halfway through.

3/5.



Blind reading to the Lame.

DECEMBER 2015

- **Why Your Five Year-Old Could Not Have Done That: Modern Art Explained**

(2013) by Susie Hodge. An attempted defence of the current reigning artistic paradigm: low-skill, high-concept, contemptuous of past, audience, and self; identitarian. Call it *anaesthetic conceptualism*. It is also a nice illustrated catalogue of some recent objects that have managed to piss various people off. 150 years ago, we direly needed people to make art larger, to stand against the Academic approach of Nice Hard Mimesis Only. The problem is that since the 50s many artists replaced that shallow spectacle of mere mimetic skill with the even shallower spectacle of empty originality and flashy cynicism. This book has *such* a patronising presentation; it could have been named "How to explain conceptualism to your five year-old". (I guess that could have been an intentional irony, but to me it just told me what she thinks of anyone sceptical of the trend. But some kudos for being clear, since this makes the hollowness of her points blatant.)

I have to applaud her; unlike the rest of her curator peers, she has at least *attempted* to justify a gigantically expensive, creativity-draining, status-hogging practice with close readings. I should also thank her for tacitly admitting that the only hermeneutics that can justify anaesthetic conceptualism is a small-minded and super-conservative intentionalism (i.e. 'what matters about the work is what the artist meant').² "It doesn't really matter how the object looks; what really matters is how deep the creator was and how much history you can project on it." But this philosophy of art is convincing to no-one not already invested in the great tedious playground. I dislike most of this art, and this way of talking about it, because I want to love art.

2 Though the so-called [intentional fallacy](#) is not actually a fallacy - it does not make sense to say that someone is *literally mistaken* to think that the creator's view of an artwork is the only relevant one, since aesthetic interpretation doesn't admit of literal error - instead it's just an incredibly limited and superstitious philosophy - along the same lines as deontology in ethics. It makes art a small and mostly ancient thing, while aesthetic experience could instead rise to each of the potential billions of minds that come to it, and it always takes place in the present, with entirely novel meanings generated, far beyond the ken of any creator.

I am aware that 'fallacy' has found usage outside of its original meaning, 'a failure in logical reasoning'. But the new usage, committed for instance by Beardsley, is something shitey like 'a horrible belief I don't like boo'. I'm generally torn between a descriptive and a prescriptive philosophy of vocabulary, but in this case the bullying and sloppy-mindedness of the new usage makes me deny it outright. Some words are too important to give up. (Mostly epistemology tbh.)

That's an unforgivably poncey thing to say, not least because I don't think I really mean it. If crap artists had not usurped a good portion of all the species' attention and reverence, I don't think I'd care what modern art was like. But as it is they are cheaters - even the great ones. They cheat themselves into immortality and perceived profundity via the handy expedient of prettiness and vagueness or ugliness and vagueness. In a way, they and we cheat malaria victims of huge sums, while the very people who claim to care about global injustices cheer us dumping more money into it, while saying things like 'life isn't worth living without art'. Well, *maybe* it wouldn't be, but life is not worth living if you're dead either, and there is enough art already.

Anyway, this is a useful catalogue of the kind of low-skill pieces that have only recently been possible and that you need to know about to move in certain presumably unbearable circles.

3/5, for the pictures. [Library]

- ***Awakenings*** (1973) by Oliver Sacks. An oppressive book: case studies of profoundly frozen people: contorted, whispering, impassive for decades, at best. One of the most poignant real events I think I've ever heard of: the medical reversal of effective, affective death - and but only a temporary reversal. Sacks really hadn't developed his style by this point: I quite liked the technical medical report feel, but it both highly technical and highly melodramatic: there is much of infinitudes of the soul, titratabilities, and perseveratably festinative resipiscences in it. Also a nice subtle stylistic note: he breaks apart dead metaphors to revive them (e.g. "wild life", "death bed").

Also lacking is his later grand balancing of romance with reason.³ For instance, he falls right off the edge on pp.97, seeing numbers as enemies of people:

I suddenly realised the infinite nature, the qualitative infinity of the phenomenon... One speaks of infinite anguishes, poignancies, desires, and joys - and one does so naturally, with no sense of paradox - i.e. one conceives of them in a metaphysical sense. But

³ Call it the *classical* vs the *romantic* (as does Pirsig), *Erklaerung oder Verstehen* (as in Dilthey, Weber), the *outside view* v the *inside view* (Kahneman), or *Logos* v *Mythos* (as twere in ancient Greece).

Parkinsonism - wasn't this categorically different? Was it not a simple, mechanical disorder of function - something essentially finite, something which could be measured in the divisions of a suitable scale? ... When I saw Hester, I suddenly realised that all I had thought about the finite, ponderable, numerable nature of Parkinsonism was nonsense. I suddenly realized, at this moment, that Parkinsonism could in no sense be seen as a thing which increased or decreased by finite increments... that it was anumerical; that from its first, infinitesimal intimation it could proceed by an infinite multitude of infinitesimal increments to an infinite, and then more infinite, and still more infinite, degree of severity... [Footnote twenty years later] I see it as requiring models or concepts which had not been created in the 1960s, in particular those of chaos and nonlinear dynamics.

We rationalize, we dissimilate, we pretend: we pretend that modern medicine is a rational science, all facts, no nonsense, and just what it seems. But we have only to tap its glossy veneer for it to split wide open, and reveal to us its roots and foundations, its old dark heart of metaphysics, mysticism, magic, and myth. Medicine is the oldest of the arts, and the oldest of the sciences: would one not expect it to spring from the deepest knowledge and feelings we have?

It's a repetitive book for a maximally repetitive disease. The wonder and personalising detail he lavishes on each case aren't enough to get me past the surprising uniformity of the bizarre symptoms and the hell of it all. Just as well I'm not a doctor.

4/5.

- ***Expert Political Judgment*** (2005) by Phillip Tetlock. Showing that very few political analysts know what they're talking about - they are usually worse than chance - and then trying to find out why. Deeply important. Discussion here.

4*/5.

- Reread: ***What If?*** (2014) by Randall Munroe. Completely rigorous whimsy, often the first time science has been applied to the thing at hand. Pure mind-candy - but, in the absence of real physics education, also improving. They are free here.

5?/5.

- **More What If?: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been** (2002) by various. Not a sequel. Little counterfactuals involving single decisions of single lives that would probably have had vast effects on the present world. Needed this book because, at my school, the big historical cliches - Hastings - were divorced from their effects. Had Socrates died before meeting Plato, two thousand years of persuasive anti-democratic thought might have been prevented; had Zheng He just kept going, a Confucian America without a divine mandate to convert and subjugate, and an overwhelmed, boxed-in and thus united pre-colonial Europe might have resulted.

It may be coincidental, but it is suggestive nonetheless that the interest among serious historians in counterfactual analysis basically corresponds with the rise of a dramatically new way of looking at the physics of complex systems, known popularly as chaos theory.

They are also just great stories, cf. Adam Gopnik:

It is the aim of all academic historians in our time to drain as much drama from history as is consistent with the facts; and it is the goal of popular historians to add as much drama to history as is consistent with the facts, or can be made to seem so.

This is the former people doing the latter work. Damn good fun, and maybe valuable in the absence of proper modelling.

4/5.

- In one gulp: **Never Mind** (1992) by Edward St Aubyn. Tense, effortless, funny, devastating. A single day in the lurid upper-class, building to a dinner party, but eliding all the contempt we might feel with pathos and pain and humour. Dialogue is consistently impressive. Victor is the most convincing philosopher character I've seen in ages - neurotic, analytic. Patrick's model of the world is slightly too sophisticated model for a five-year-old, but the scene in which he's introduced is the most convincing childlike prose:

Patrick walked towards the well. In his hand he carried a grey plastic sword with a gold handle, and swished it at the pink flowers of the valerian plants that grew out of the terrace wall. When there

was a snail on one of the fennel stems, he sliced his sword down the stalk and made it fall off. If he killed a snail he had to stamp on it quickly and then run away, because it went all squishy like blowing your nose. Then he would go back and have a look at the broken brown shell stuck in the soft grey flesh, and would wish he hadn't done it. It wasn't fair to squash the snails after it rained because they came out to play, bathing in the pools under the dripping leaves and stretching out their horns. When he touched their horns they darted back and his hand darted back as well. For snails he was like a grown-up.

And the venomous, purely perverse relationship of his parents produces gasping lines like

At the beginning, there had been talk of using some of her money to start a home for alcoholics. In a sense they had succeeded.

I stumble over David, the charming psychopath rampant. It is too hard to understand intentional evil, even when snobbery, tough love parenting and simple rage are proffered as explanations. I had a *petite mort* at the end. Really fantastic.

4*/5 or more.

- ***The Utopia of Rules*** (2013) by David Graeber. Bureaucracy is the dominant structure in adult life throughout the world. And everybody hates it, including the people nominally in power. How does *that* work? This discursive and suggestive answer is full of his usual sparkling insights and big dubious historical claims:

The organization of the Soviet Union was directly modeled on that of the German postal service.

He makes a series of pretty serious economic errors in his wonderful "Flying Cars" essay. I will send them to him and think he will agree, if I'm right. His point about corporate life being just as bureaucratic as public orgs, but rarely called such in policy debates, is very important, and that left utopias also tend to wrap themselves in inane regulation. Book is in general slightly overegged - but compared to most anarchist social theory he is a model of rigour, epistemic care and systematic focus. (In fact he is very critical of academic theorists and applied leftists both):

Foucault's ascendancy in turn was precisely within those fields of academic endeavor that both became the haven for former radicals, but that were themselves most completely divorced from any access to political power, or increasingly, even to real social movements—which gave Foucault's emphasis on the “power/knowledge” nexus, the assertion that forms of knowledge are always also forms of social power, indeed, the most important forms of social power, a particular appeal.

No doubt any such historical argument is a bit caricaturish and unfair; but I think there is a profound truth here. It is not just that we are drawn to areas of density, where our skills at interpretation are best deployed. We also have an increasing tendency to identify what's interesting and what's important, to assume places of density are also places of power. The power of bureaucracy shows just how much this is often not the case.

Grovels to standpoint theory when he is told that they had similar ideas earlier (which he hadn't read and which they never put so clearly). But pure and clear and witty, heretical to his tribes - and as original as always.

...if we're going to actually come up with robots that will do our laundry or tidy up the kitchen, we're going to have to make sure that whatever replaces capitalism is based on a far more egalitarian distribution of wealth and power—one that no longer contains either the super-rich or desperately poor people willing to do their housework. Only then will technology begin to be marshaled toward human needs. And this is the best reason to break free of the dead hand of the hedge fund managers and the CEOs—to free our fantasies from the screens in which such men have imprisoned them, to let our imaginations once again become a material force in human history.

4/5.

- ***Smarter than Us: The Rise of Machine Intelligence*** (2012) by Stuart Armstrong. Very clear and brief, just the bare argumentation. Published by MIRI, but not propaganda. Not sure what I think, even so.

4/5.

- ***The Year of Living Biblically*** (2010) by AJ Jacobs. The Old Testament has roughly 700 rules of varying severity and absurdity; Jacobs tried to follow all of them for a year. For a host of reasons, this can't be done, and so this is a reductio of biblical literalism. It is also a sympathetic anthropology of the literal Other Side, who are low-status, even in parts of America.
 1. The mad rules: never wear mixed fibres; no rubber tires; burning a red cow is the only way to be pure person; all the precise shabbat rules about what you can and can't do; basically anything involving women. Judaism actually has a specific word for the arbitrary, stupid divine laws: the *chukim*. The various brilliant, witty cafeteria theists he consults are open about them being silly tests - fun puzzles, even.
 2. The blatantly evolutionary / patriarchal rules: no other gods before me, no shellfish, modest women.
 3. He is keen to show the noble side to the real literalists: they practice tithing, pacifism, no hell, are activists for global debt jubilee. (A handful of lovely policies out of the mad and thoughtless other 700, mind you.) One group are even admirable on epistemic, philological grounds!: "*You can't follow all of the Bible literally because we can't know what some of the words mean.*" Sure they take this to be a reason to be even more extreme than ever stipulated, just to be safe, but I admire the rigour of it.

An extremely open-minded man; he meets the Creation Museum people, and the Amish, and the snake handlers. I didn't like the constant stream of cheap gags or his wielding family details for padding. I def didn't like his earnest attempt to use cognitive dissonance to delude himself into theism:

The notion of obeying laws that have no rational explanation is a jarring one. For most of my life, I've been working under the paradigm that my behavior should have a logical basis. But if you live biblically, this is not true. I have to adjust my brain to this.

... When I first read the parable of the prodigal son, I was perplexed. I felt terrible for the older brother. The poor man put in all these years of loyal service, and his brother skips town, has a wild good time, then returns, and gets a huge feast? It seems outrageously unfair.

But that's if you're thinking quantitatively. If you're looking at life as a balance sheet. There's a beauty to forgiveness, especially

forgiveness that goes beyond rationality. Unconditional love is an illogical notion, but such a great and powerful one.

(That simply strikes me as choosing to be mistaken and then hardening oneself to injustice.)

He is not quite sophisticated enough to pull off rigorous naturalist wonder fully (but again this is me cruelly comparing a journalist to Nietzsche, Pessoa, Gopnik). But the following affirmation of mythos here is more or less my view:

I'm still agnostic. But in the words of Elton Richards, I'm now a reverant agnostic. Which isn't an oxymoron, I swear. I now believe that whether or not there's a God, there is such a thing as sacredness. Life is sacred. The Sabbath can be a sacred day. Prayer can be a sacred ritual. There is something transcendent, beyond the everyday. It's possible that humans created this sacredness ourselves, but that doesn't take away from its power or importance.

Literalism is impossible, immoral and inconsistent with our new, better picture of the world; biblical liberalism is mercenary and inconsistent with itself. So don't bother?

3/5.

- **Thing Explainer** (2015) by Randall Munroe. So wonderful; technical diagrams big and small, annotated with only the 1000 ("ten hundred") most common words. Perhaps the greatest book that everyone above the age of 3 can appreciate.
4*/5.
- **Behind the Wall: A Journey through China** (1987) by Colin Thubron. Spectacular, unskimmable, the best China book I've seen. (It's not a long list.)
5?/5.
- **Why Freud Was Wrong** (1995) by Richard Webster. What a fucking book! Title is apt: this is not just a comprehensive catalogue of the gigantic errors and lies Freud told throughout his career - some of them criminally negligent and emotionally abusive - but also a psychological explanation of why he made

them. Full discussion forthcoming.

5?/5

*My boy is painting outer space,
and steadies his brush-tip to trace
the comets, planets, moon and sun
and all the circuitry they run*

*in one great heavenly design.
But when he tries to close the line
he draws around his upturned cup,
his hand shakes, and he screws it up.*

*The shake's as old as he is, all
(thank god) his body can recall
of the hour when, one inch from home,
we couldn't get the air to him;*

*and though today he's all the earth
and sky for breathing-space and breath
the whole damn troposphere can't cure
the flutter in his signature.*

*But Jamie, nothing's what we meant.
The dream is taxed. We all resent
the quarter bled off by the dark
between the bowstring and the mark*

*and trust to Krishna or to fate
to keep our arrows halfway straight.
But the target also draws our aim -
our will and nature's are the same;*

*we are its living word, and not
a book it wrote and then forgot,
its fourteen-billion-year-old song
inscribed in both our right and wrong -*

*so even when you rage and moan
and bring your fist down like a stone
on your spoiled work and useless kit,
you just can't help but broadcast it:>*

*look at the little avatar
of your muddy water-jar
filling with the perfect ring
singing under everything.*

- Don Paterson

I'm back on part-time university maths, which saps most of my real reading time. There is maybe something pathological about how irritable and small I feel when not reading in quantity. But half of life is about steering one's pathologies into productive rhythm, so whatever.

JANUARY 2016

- **Rogues, Villains and Eccentrics** (2002) by William Donaldson. Addicting, horrible and hilarious biographies of British folly, banality and sin. A thousand years of tabloid gossip and popular madness, events too ephemeral for most serious historians: degradation, unchecked insanity and petty cruelty. But incredibly funny. The biographies are spaced out by Donaldson's wonderful little hooks, dry sentences that lead one on a wiki-walk:
 - *ears, bagfuls of drying*
 - *universes, privileged to be part of a team working in many*
 - *drinking 'brain damage' while composing a speech for Michael Heseltine*
 - *coal merchants, remarkable*
 - *voluptuous Tartars and tun-bellied Chinese*
 - *dog on a diet of cats, feeding one's 12-stone*
 - *soft heart and 83 previous convictions, a*

He has particular obsessions, and the book is organised around this: the fate of gays throughout British history; criminal priests, eccentric spinster aristocrats, the line of succession of London ganglords from Jonathan Wild onward; politicians doing what they ought not; the odd fates private schoolboys often find themselves in... Obviously this is no demerit in an unsystematic historian. The modern gang biographies attest to his personal acquaintance with the big diamond geezers (which makes him a "silly bollocks", a foolish gang dilettante). His wit's mostly very dry, on occasion boiling over into outrage:

Dodd's execution took place at Tyburn on 27 June 1777 and the outcry it occasioned has been recognized by some historians as a key moment in focusing public attention on the brutality of capital punishment. It seems more likely, however, that it was caused less by any broad change in public opinion than by the fact Dodd was of the

same class as those protesting his execution. A 15-year-old orphan, John Harris, hanged on the same day for stealing two and half guineas, received no such support, least of all from Dr Johnson.

Under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, the law was changed to ensure that the production and supply of dangerous drugs should henceforth be in the hands of criminal organisations. Some people have argued that this is not an ideal arrangement.

I made the mistake of trying to read it over one week - so the endless succession of 18th century rapist officers being instantly pardoned and/or their victims being arrested kind of ran together. It is actually the best bog book ever and wants 4 slow months. I understand Britain a lot better now. The author would emphatically deserve an entry of his own in any future edition: astonishing wit, astonishing connections, astonishing potential, with little to show for it but a barrel of laughs and this.

4*/5.

- ***This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*** (2014) by Naomi Klein.
Thoughtful and exciting but not persuasive. As economics this is shaky, and as politics unlikely, but she remains one of the best journalists I know of. (i.e. person who works at the “These terrible and wonderful and unknown things are happening; here is what the people involved say. What might it mean?” level.) Considerable. Full review forthcoming.

3*/5.

- ***Selected Poems*** (1975-2011) by Jaan Kaplinski. A very broad swathe from Estonia's most stately rustic. He keeps a high eyrie but has a fatherly musk as well. It's a chilly nest though - occasionally anti-human:

*It gets cold in the evening. The sky clears.
The wind dies out, and the smoke
rises straight up. The flowering maple
no longer buzzes. A carp
plops in the pond. An owl hoots twice
in its nest in the ash tree.*

*The children are asleep. On the stairs,
a long row of shoes and rubber boots.
It happened near Viljandi: an imbecile boy
poured gasoline on the neighbour's three-year-old
and set him on fire. I ran for milk.
You could see the yellow maple from far off
between the birches and the spruce. The evening star
was shining above the storehouse. The boy survived,
probably maimed for life. The night will bring frost.
Plentiful dew.*

He gets called a particularly European (a particularly Unionised) poet, and this is true enough: Kant's rationalist cool and Smith's pragmatism really are pedal notes. But there are snippets of *nine* languages in this mid-sized selection, including Sanskrit and Japanese (the ukiyo-e/mono-no-aware rhythms of which he owes a great deal to) and a poke of originals in pragmatic, wriggling English. That is, he's really a globalist. His own Estonian ("serious, greyish") is of course not remotely Indo-European, instead fluting and crashing, riverine, out of the Urals. (It would be silly to say that his work's bleak because some people he is descended from came from Siberia, but if I were a marketer rather than a gadfly it would be a good hook.) Let's complicate matters with paternal domestic and wide-eyed enquirer:

*Lines do not perhaps exist; there are only points.
Just as there are no constellations, only stars
which we combine into water-carriers, fish, rams,
virgins, scorpions and ourselves...
outlines, ground plans, principles, reasons,
ulterior motives and consequences...
A solitary birch holds onto its last leaves by the woodshed.
Or the leaves hold onto the birch.
Or there is someone holds onto both,
a child holding his father's and mother's hands at once.
I am sorry for them – the child, the leaves
the father, the birch and the mother.
But I do not know, really, for whom: if the birch exists,
if there are only points...
There are only molecules and atoms, which move increasingly
slowly,
which is roughly the same as saying: warmth disperses
throughout space. Both the child's hands were cold.
Night is coming - light is roughly the same as warmth.
Light scatters in the empty room. New thoughts
come so seldom. Your hand is warm. So is the night.*

*The poem is ready. If the poem exists at all:
there are only points. It is dark.*

This wonderful latter aside (and anti-poetry though he is) I do not like him constantly bringing up poetry; the poems where he does are often po-faced and contentless. But he is a master and it's his business what he chooses to cool by just gazing at it.

4/5.

FEBRUARY 2016

- **Accelerando** (2004) by Charles Stross. His grandest statement so far: a scary family-dynasty epic told at that point in history where generational gaps grow unbridgeably vast on the spume of telescoping technological progression. First book is a wonderful freewheel through the near-future, with his technolibertarian booster protagonist – Sam Altman meets Richard Stallman meets Ventakesh Rao – running around as midwife to the future. Includes a nepotistic jaunt through Edinburgh because why not (it's a tech town after all). It is both funny and prescient (about e.g. our dependence on feeds and open-source expansion).

Welcome to the early twenty-first century, human. It's night in Milton Keynes, sunrise in Hong Kong. Moore's Law rolls inexorably on, dragging humanity toward the uncertain future. The planets of the solar system have a combined mass of approximately 2×10^{27} kilograms. Around the world, laboring women produce forty-five thousand babies a day, representing 10^{23} MIPS of processing power. Also around the world, fab lines casually churn out thirty million microprocessors a day, representing 10^{23} MIPS. In another 10 months, most of the MIPS added to the solar system will be machine-hosted for the first time.

The later books work less well; they become less and less convincing as we reach the singularity (his grasp of the physics and the economics of computers and space is characteristically excellent, and it's all hard enough) - more and more of that omniscient voiceover guy is needed.

Not everyone is concerned with the deep future. But it's important! If we live or die, that doesn't matter—that's not the big picture. The big question is whether information originating in our light cone is preserved, or whether we're stuck in a lossy medium where our very existence counts for nothing. It's downright embarrassing to be a member of a species with such a profound lack of curiosity about its own future, especially when it affects us all personally!

I agree with Kahneman, though, that it is wrong to put as much weight on a weak ending as people tend to; the experiencing self, who was deeply impressed most of the time, should not be relegated so.

In the distance, the cat hears the sound of lobster minds singing in the void, a distant feed streaming from their cometary home as it

drifts silently out through the asteroid belt, en route to a chilly encounter beyond Neptune. The lobsters sing of alienation and obsolescence, of intelligence too slow and tenuous to support the vicious pace of change that has sandblasted the human world until all the edges people cling to are jagged and brittle.

As always, many incredible thoughts embodied in very vivid scenes – it deserves the technical glossary supplied by fans here - and you've no regrets about spending time with him. But again I've the patronising sense that he fluffed it.
Book I 5/5, Book II 3/5, III 2/5

= **3*/5.**

[Free! here.]

- **Stamboul Train** (1932) by Graham Greene. Better known as *Orient Express*. He tried to write a stupid book – murder on a train, a neurotic Jewish financier, a doomed third-rate dancer, a clumsy lesbian journalist - and failed. Actually about gender and lasting damage:

"why do you do all this for me? I'm not pretty. I guess I'm not clever."

She waited with longing for a denial. "You are lovely, brilliant, witty", the incredible words which would relieve her of any need to repay him or refuse his gifts; loveliness and wit were priced higher than any gift he offered, while if a girl were loved, even old women of hard experience would admit her right to take and never give. But he denied nothing. His answer was almost insulting in its simplicity.

"I can talk easily to you. I feel I know you." She knew what that meant.

"Yes," she said, with the dry trivial grief of disappointment, "I seem to know you too"...

Heartbreaking in his usual profound manner.

4/5.

MARCH 2016

- Reread: *Gateway* (1975) by Frederik Pohl. Hits hard, leaves marks. The same ignoble, epistemically pinched, economically realist sci-fi written by the Strugatskys or Stross. I love it so much that even the Rogerian psychotherapy at its core doesn't annoy me; that even its 90% focus on one spoiled and abusive bastard is a merit of it. Spoilers everywhere. Physics and sin. No shortage of things left to do.

5/5.

- *Superintelligence* (2014) by Nick Bostrom. Like much great philosophy, *Superintelligence* acts like a space elevator: by making many, many small, reasonable, careful movements - you suddenly find yourself in outer space, home comforts far, far below. It is as rigorous as any work whose topic doesn't exist can be; its author is one of the clearest thinkers I have ever encountered, (and I've been trying quite hard to encounter those). I didn't find this hard to read, but I have been marinating in tech rationalism for a few years and have absorbed much of it at third-hand so YMMV.

Many of the points made in this book are probably wrong. It is also likely that there are considerations of critical importance that I fail to take into account, thereby invalidating some or all of my conclusions. I have gone to some length to indicate nuances and degrees of uncertainty throughout the text — encumbering it with an unsightly smudge of “possibly,” “might,” “may,” “could well,” “it seems,” “probably,” “very likely,” “almost certainly.” Each qualifier has been placed where it is carefully and deliberately. Yet these topical applications of epistemic modesty are not enough; they must be supplemented here by a systemic admission of uncertainty and fallibility. This is not false modesty: for while I believe that my book is likely to be seriously wrong and misleading, I think that the alternative views that have been presented in the literature are substantially worse - including the default view, according to which we can for the time being reasonably ignore the prospect of superintelligence.

Bostrom introduces dozens of neologisms and many arguments. Here is the main scary apriori one though:

1. Just being intelligent doesn't imply being benign; intelligence and virtue can be independent. (*the orthogonality thesis.*)
2. Any agent which seeks resources and lacks explicit moral programming would default to dangerous behaviour. You are made of things it can use; hate is unnecessary. (*Instrumental convergence.*)
3. It is conceivable that AIs might gain capability very rapidly through recursive self-improvement. (*Non-negligible possibility of a hard takeoff.*)
4. Since AIs will not be automatically nice, would by default do harmful things, and could obtain a lot of power very quickly⁴, AI safety is morally significant, deserving public funding, serious research, and international scrutiny.

Of far broader interest than its title (and that argument) might suggest to you. In particular, it is the best introduction I've seen to the new, shining decision sciences - an undervalued reinterpretation of old, vague ideas which, until recently, you only got to see if you read statistics, *and* economics, *and* the crunchier side of psychology. It is also a history of humanity, a thoughtful treatment of psychometrics v genetics, and a rare objective estimate of the worth of large organisations, past and future.

Superintelligence's main purpose is moral: he wants us to worry and act urgently about hypotheticals; given this rhetorical burden, his tone too is a triumph.

For a child with an undetonated bomb in its hands, a sensible thing to do would be to put it down gently, quickly back out of the room, and contact the nearest adult. Yet what we have here is not one child but many, each with access to an independent trigger mechanism. The chances that we will all find the sense to put down the dangerous stuff seem almost negligible. Some little idiot is bound to press the ignite button just to see what happens. Nor can we attain safety by running away, for the blast of an intelligence explosion would bring down the firmament. Nor is there a grown-up in sight...

⁴ People sometimes choke on this point, but note that [the first intelligence](#), Satoshi Nakamoto, to obtain half a billion dollars virtually, anonymously, purely via mastery of maths occurred... just now. Robin Hanson [chokes eloquently here](#) and for god's sake let's hope he's right.

This is not a prescription of fanaticism. The intelligence explosion might still be many decades off in the future. Moreover, the challenge we face is, in part, to hold on to our humanity: to maintain our groundedness, common sense, and goodhumored decency even in the teeth of this most unnatural and inhuman problem. We need to bring all human resourcefulness to bear on its solution.

I don't donate to AI safety orgs, despite caring about the best way to improve the world and despite having no argument against it better than "that's not how software has worked so far" and despite the concern of smart experts. This sober and kindly book makes me realise this has more to do with fear of others' sneering insinuations than noble scepticism or even empathy.

4.5/5.

- **A Devil's Chaplain** (2003) by Richard Dawkins. Essay collection from his heyday. His letter to his 10yo daughter is maybe the clearest statement of sceptical empiricism ever, though it also displays the blithe wonkishness that alienates most people:

Suppose I told you that your dog was dead. You'd be very upset, and you'd probably say, 'Are you sure? How do you know? How did it happen?' Now suppose I answered: 'I don't actually know that Pepe is dead. I have no evidence. I just have this funny feeling deep inside me that he is dead.' You'd be pretty cross with me for scaring you, because you'd know that an inside 'feeling' on its own is not a good reason for believing that a whippet is dead. You need evidence. We all have inside feelings from time to time, and sometimes they turn out to be right and sometimes they don't. Anyway, different people have opposite feelings, so how are we to decide whose feeling is right? The only way to be sure that a dog is dead is to see him dead, or hear that his heart has stopped; or be told by somebody who has seen or heard some real evidence that he is dead.

People sometimes say that you must believe in your deep feelings inside, otherwise you'd never be confident of things like 'My wife loves me'. But this is a bad argument. There can be plenty of evidence that somebody loves you. All through the day when you are with somebody who loves you, you see and hear lots of little tidbits of evidence, and they all add up. It isn't purely inside feeling, like the feeling that priests call revelation. There are outside things to back up the inside feeling: looks in the eye, tender notes in the voice, little favors and kindnesses; this is all real evidence.

Aaag he used to be so wise and grand. (He remains brave and clear, but you don't always want to look through this windows anymore.)

3*/5.

- Reread: ***Tell Me No Lies*** (2004) edited by John Pilger. Anthology of great investigative journalism, mostly of ignored or neocolonial massacres. (You don't resent Pilger putting his own Cambodia piece in.) Went into this with one eye on Pilger's ideology, but almost every piece is grounded and humane and appalling and beyond the reach of theory to pervert. (Only the Eduardo Galeano rant addresses too many targets at once and fades into zine-ish aspersions. But even that's more than half true.) Gellhorn on Dachau. Cameron on North Vietnam. Hersh on My Lai. Lockerbie. Iraq. The overall target is the powerful who stand by or enable atrocities; Kissinger leers like a terrible wraith from more than a few of these pieces. I cried at this ten years ago and again now and again whenever.

5/5.

*Springs and summers full of song and revolution.
The Popular Front, demonstrations and confrontations,
time that takes you away from yourself and your poetry,
so that you could see them as if from cosmic space,
a way of looking that changes everything into stars,
our Earth, you and me, Estonia and Eritrea,
blue anemones and the Pacific Ocean.
Even the belief that you will write more poems. Something
that was breathing into you,
as May wind blows into a house
bringing smells of mown grass and dogs' barks, -
this something has dissipated, become invisible
like stars in daylight. For quite a time I haven't
permitted myself to hope it would come back.
I know I am not free, I am nothing without
this breathing, inspiration, wind that comes
through the window. Let God be free,
whether he exist or no. And then, it comes
once again. At dusk in the countryside
when I go to an outhouse, a little
white moth flies out of the door.
That's it, now. And the dusk around me
begins little by little to breathe in words and syllables.*

*

*In the morning, I was presented to President Mitterrand,
in the evening, I was weeding nettles from under the currant
bushes.
A lot happened inbetween, the ride from Tallinn to Tartu and to
our country home
through the spring that we had waited for so long,
and that came, as always, unexpectedly,
changing serious greyish Estonia at once
into a primary school child's drawing in pale green,
into a play-landscape where mayflies, mayors and cars
are all somewhat tiny and ridiculous... In the evening
I saw the full moon rising above the alder grove. Two bats
circled over the courtyard. The President's hand
was soft and warm. As were his eyes,
where fatigue was, in a curious way,
mingled with force, and depth with banality.
He had bottomless night eyes
with something mysterious in them
like the paths of moles underground
or the places where bats hibernate and sleep.*

- Jaan Kaplinski

Michal Goldman April 3, 2016 at 6:08 AM

I woke up this morning seeing snow, thinking about the architecture of language and its implications for philosophy, and missing Hilary Putnam. And then I read this, his last blog post. I wonder what kind of collective conversation might happen if people continued to write here the kinds of things they'd like to talk with Hilary about.

[Reply](#)

Minh Nguyen April 6, 2016 at 1:51 AM

Bạn có biết ở đâu bán chevrolet cruze cũ để mua liên hệ mua không ?

[Reply](#)

Moze Hel April 20, 2016 at 6:32 AM

Plates come in a ramification of weights, and also you need a diffusion, so you can scale up the quantity of weights you work with, each in your legs and in your hands.
<http://guidemesupplements.com/jacked-muscle-extreme/>

[Reply](#)

Manfaat buah rambutan bagi kesehatan April 22, 2016 at 11:54 PM

Thanks bro. i like this

[Reply](#)

Klavye İşaretleri May 2, 2016 at 10:34 AM

Sanal İşaretler Listesi

[Reply](#)

Falahun May 25, 2016 at 6:13 AM

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Free Games May 29, 2016 at 10:24 AM

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Aji June 20, 2016 at 6:13 AM

I Like this article very useful

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Friv100 June 26, 2016 at 9:33 PM

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[Reply](#)

Zinavo Bangalore June 27, 2016 at 7:19 AM

Wonderful blog & good post. Its really helpful for me, awaiting for more new post. Keep Blogging! [Web Designing Company Bangalore](#) | [Website Design Company Bangalore](#)

The actual comment thread on the final blogpost of Hilary Putnam

...with the Oxford node investigating cognitive enhancement, the Maastricht node mood enhancement, Milano life extension, Stockholm bodily enhancement, and Bristol coordinating us..."

- fragment from Anders Sandberg

I realized that I would never be able to live in a decent relationship with the people of that country unless I could drive this book, and its politely arrogant world view, out of my head.

- obviously I had to read the book this sentence refers to, and pay it much more heed than I otherwise would've

Spent a dreadful week preparing for a data science interview. It was dreadful because it's about memorising hundreds of difficult ideas from a few different fields: a more descriptive job title would be "Statistical programmer / machine teacher / web scraper / sysadmin / graphic designer" - so you see how this is my latest scheme to find interdisciplinary freedom outside the academy. (The headers in this crib sheet for the profession are "Predictive Modeling, Programming, Probability theory, Statistical Inference, Data Analysis, and Communication". From the outside, those topics look very samey - just a load of stats stuff, right? - but they are actually heterogeneous talents rarely found in the same braincase. Even "predictive modelling" and "(Fisherian) statistical inference" are or were socially incompatible approaches!)

I'm still far from possessing real mathematical literacy, and I'm a positively jejune systems engineer. but something must've stuck cos I'm starting in the autumn.

APRIL 2016

- Reread: ***The Algebraist*** (2008) by Iain Banks. Satisfying mind candy. (Themes: the fate of citizens in a war between fascists; simulationism as an official state religion; a jolly solipsistic species which enjoys civil war). Too full of infodumps and too circuitous to reach his personal best (which I would say is the genre's personal best): it lacks the grander metaphysical framework of the *Culture* books, which handle civilization at the limit - where philosophy is at last unavoidable because practical matters have been solved and tucked away. It does have a right good baddie - a calm galactic overlord driven to be demonic and obscene for PR reasons. But the protagonist, a thoughtful manipulated academic, isn't interesting. I missed the book's grand conceit the first time I read this: the MacGuffin that drives everything is an epic, lost book called the *The Algebraist*, described only as being:

all about mathematics, navigation as a metaphor, duty, love, longing, honour, long voyages home... All that stuff.

3*/5. (Series is 4*/5.)

- Reread: ***Guns, Germs and Steel*** (1997) by Jared Diamond. Recognisably a popularisation, but it's in an under-reported field (speculative human geography) so it is still high in nourishing insight. Exciting, thoughtful, deserving of the hype.

Q: *Why is it that you white people developed much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?*

A: *History followed different courses for different peoples because of differences among people's environments, not because of biological differences among people themselves.*

Title's misleading: all three of those pro-colonialist environmental factors are merely proximate effects of what he argues is the ultimate cause of world inequality: domesticable crops and livestock *on a continent which happens to be oriented in a way that makes its climate very similar across wide latitudes*. His theory explicitly disclaims racist explanations of world history - e.g. his chapter

on the conquistadors is the most harrowing account I've ever read - and he says things like

When I arrived in New Guinea for the first time, it became clear to me that New Guineans are curious, questioning, talkative people with complex languages and social relationships, on the average at least as intelligent as Europeans and Americans. In New Guinea, I'm the dope who can't do elementary things like follow an unmarked trail or light a fire in the rain.

Yet the anthropologists' party line on him is just that: that he's a racist and, almost worse in that circle, a determinist. I feel perfectly fair in explaining their rancour by his skilful scientific intrusion on their ill-tended turf. (Diamond was originally an ornithologist and geneticist.) Engaging and original as it is, his thesis faces a hard explanatory limit: agriculture has not been the limiting factor on economies for more than 200 years, and yet the Great Divergence dates from then and not earlier. Diamond could appeal to simple path-dependency: "we win now because we won then" or argue that the technological and military edge yielded land, and that land yielded the economic miracle. But the evidence (also known as Gregory Clark) certainly does not warrant crop or zoological supremacism.

Anyway I know of no better introduction to cultural evolution theory, human population genetics, the Clovis / pre-Clovis controversy, philology, New Guinean traditionalism, the origins and downsides of civilization, animal husbandry, and the ancient history of Africa.

In one sentence: See Q&A above.

4/5 (minus a half for awful references - vague, without page numbers in the text or in the source, nor footnotes).

- **The Victorians** (2002) by AN Wilson. A witty and sloppy synopsis. It is neither materialist nor idealist: he locates power in people. Or, in anecdotes about people really. (Is that still materialism? Funny kind if so.) He has such a huge throbbing agenda - e.g. his caricature of Bentham, his bizarre claim that capitalism suppresses individuality, rather than being totally, totally dependent on it - but I didn't resent it because he is so patent about it and because he is funny:

descended jointly from an unscrupulous Irish soldier and a German Jew. Given this, it is surprising that these families manifested so few of the talents stereotypically attributed to the Irish and the Jews; such as wit or good looks.

Karl Marx, as so often, made an accurate observation of the political scene and drew a false inference from it.

He loves Disraeli and Albert, hates Gladstone and Palmerston. I have no idea if this is an original position. Got tired of his tone and scattergun of stories about two-thirds in. About as good as popular history that isn't data-driven can be.

In one sentence: This is where modernity - feminism, multiculturalism, managerialism, professionalism, mechanised warfare - originated: in little moments that happened to people who happened to write them down.

3*/5.

- ***The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared*** (2009) by Jonas Jonasson. Surprisingly acerbic! The advertised Scandinavian pop silliness is present, but tamped down nicely by *Gulliver's Travels* satire: a man blown around by the mad political convulsions of the past century. Key tension: the book's main target is people in the grip of political ideologies. The eponymous Allan is held up as a model exception: possessing sensible, apolitical, unfashionable grit and humour. But Allan ends up enabling atrocities: he saves Franco's life in '39! He gives Stalin the bomb! Are we supposed to conclude, against the narrator and protagonist, that political neutrality is actually a horror? Jokes were ok, this tension was good.

In one sentence: You shouldn't underestimate old people or hurt anyone over politics, lol.

3/5.

MAY 2016

- **Critical Mass: Being an Enquiry into the Interplay of Chance and Necessity in the Way That Human Culture, Customs, Institutions, Cooperation and Conflict Arise** (2004) by Philip Ball. An elegant pop treatment of the burgeoning physics of mass human behaviour. (Which physics follows hundreds of years of stupid and/or inhumane theories claiming the name "social physics"). A love letter to statistical mechanics:

Most people who have encountered thermodynamics blanch at its mention, because it is an awesomely tedious discipline both to learn theoretically and to investigate experimentally. This is a shame, because it is also one of the most astonishing theories in science. Think of it: here is a field of study initiated to help nineteenth-century engineers make better engines, and it turns out to produce some of the grandest and most fundamental statements about the way the entire universe works. Thermodynamics is the science of change, and without change there is nothing to be said...

Tools, methods and ideas developed to understand how the blind material fabric of the universe behaves are finding application in arenas for which they were never designed, and for which they might at first glance appear ridiculously inappropriate. Physics is finding its place in a science of society.

Introduces a hundred topics from thermodynamics, economics, econophysics, game theory, and fields which don't have a name yet, including intuitive explanations of such fearsome concepts as: self-organized criticality, the 2D and 3D Ising model, diffusion-limited aggregation in bacteria and cities, Lévy-stability, the business cycle, random walks, superfluidity and supercooling phase transitions, bifurcation theory, traffic flow, Zipf's law, the Small world phenomenon, catastrophe theory... Unlike the shiny TED-style of nonfiction, he refers directly to the original scientific papers and includes small interviews with the original researchers. No equations, but beautiful diagrams relating micro with macro, too: snowflakes to traffic and bacterial colonies to cities.

The book's reception, in the main by middlebrow, mathematically illiterate reviewers shocked me a bit: their banner conclusions were "boo! people aren't particles!!", a truism which Ball spends much of the book thinking about, and "aaar horrible people have said they've found the laws of society before!!", a truism the first fifth of the book is a history of. In their haste to protect ordinary

human difference from averages, and the notion of free will from technical explanations, they flee to safe refuges like "complexity" and "reflexivity", i.e. out of science. Ball can speak for himself though:

The notion that we could ever construct a scientific "utopia theory" [e.g. classical Marxism] is, then, doomed to absurdity. Certainly, a "physics of society" can provide nothing of the sort. One does not build an ideal world from scientifically based traffic planning, market analysis, criminology, network design, game theory, and the gamut of other ideas discussed in this book. Concepts and models drawn from physics are almost certainly going to find their way into other areas of social science, but they are not going to provide a comprehensive theory of society, nor are they going to make traditional sociology, economics, or political science redundant. The skill lies in deciding where a mechanistic, quantitative model is appropriate for describing human behavior, and where it is likely to produce nothing but a grotesque caricature. This is a skill that is still being acquired, and it is likely that there will be embarrassments along the way.

But properly and judiciously applied, physical science can furnish some valuable tools in areas such as social, economic, and civic planning, and in international negotiation and legislation. It may help us to avoid bad decisions; if we are lucky, it will give us some foresight. If there are emergent laws of traffic, of pedestrian motions, of network topologies, of urban growth, we need to know them in order to plan effectively. Once we acknowledge the universality displayed in the physical world, it should come as no surprise that the world of human social affairs is not necessarily a tabula rasa, open to all options.

Society is complex but that does not place it beyond our ken. As we have seen, complexity of form and organization can arise from simple underlying principles if they are followed simultaneously by a great many individuals.

There is a real question about how deep into human behaviour the statistical approach can go. Econophysics, as a term and as a living, funded academic subfield, fizzled out shortly after this book was published. Apparently the SOC results have come in for a lot of criticism, though mostly of their overreach than the method being humanistically inapplicable or whatevs.

Even so, I wish I had read this 5 years ago: it would have saved me lots of contortions. it taught me a huge amount anyway. (e.g. the *huge* moral panic,

following the invention of descriptive statistics, about ever using means to describe *any* human characteristics, since the remarkable stability of e.g. the C17th London crime rate across decades seemed to speak of divine or diabolical insurance.) One of my top 5 books on economics, one of my top 5 books on physics.

In one sentence: Social physics had at last begun to make exciting progress on understanding mass human behaviour.

5?/5.

- ***Leaving Alexandria: A Memoir of Faith*** (2012) by Richard Holloway. The emotional case for not being religious. I should like him - he is the most honourable instance of a public figure rationally changing his mind in living memory. And another thing sorely needed: a sympathetic, literate public nonbeliever. Also he quotes poetry from memory - for its sense, not in order to curry literary status. (We know this because he leaves the attribution of the poems to the endnotes.) He is adorable, basically, and quotable to boot. But there's a clunkiness here too, one I can't quite articulate.

As a boy he loved religion's melodrama and un-Scottish grandeur; he goes away to an eccentric militarist monastery, aged 14:

We were up at six-thirty for a cold shower followed by mass and breakfast. After household chores we were moved into study mode until the next visit to chapel at midday. After lunch, afternoons were given over to heavy labour, either scrubbing and shining floors or labouring for Brother Edward in the grounds... back to study at four, till bells summoned us to Evensong at six-thirty. Then dinner, more washing up and more study. The day ended at nine-thirty with Compline, then lights out... Each evening we left chapel in silence, under the spell of fading plainsong that marked the ending of the day.

Fun! Rammed full of order and space, but not religion per se. He was always unorthodox: he gave communion to just anyone who walked into church, happily married off divorcees, joined the LGBT movement and even claims to have held a Catholic gay marriage in the 90s. I am childish enough to enjoy his swearing, as the Bishop said to the actress. He had no more place on a government bioethics committee than any other nice clever old man, but I don't

suppose he did any harm at all.

In one sentence: Religion is pretty nice, but you must take it less seriously.

3*/5.

- **The Data Science Handbook** (2015) edited Willian Chen et al. I had been holding out hope that data science (or mining plus statistical programming, as it used to be called) could be an intellectual, rarefied place within the private sector, where the practical and the abstract are wed sweetly. It might be, but this book gives you little sense of that. Even the demonstrably brilliant (DJ Patil) talk like third-rate vice-presidents-of-munging. (You might shrug because you expected no better of computer people, but you are ill-informed: some of the great stylists of the age are programmers first of all: Gwern, Paul Graham, Alan Perlis, Jonathan Gillette, Alan Kay, Zack Davis, Aaron Swartz, Steve Yegge.)

In one sentence: Data is Innovation for incentivising proactive momentum-based cultural synergy change

2/5.

- **120 Data Science Interview Questions** (2015) by William Chen et al. As labelled. Well-structured and demanding though. Rather than pay the \$15, you can piece together a comparably good list from Quora, StackExchange, the R community and the strange confessional-professional blogsphere (and unless you are a postdoc savant you will be doing that anyway). You will need a solid statistics background (late undergrad) or you may freak out. Software is less scary because it is more amenable to live logical reconstruction. Following this book closely meant that I overprepared for my interview quite a lot, but that's a graduate role at a big corp in the UK so YMMV.

In one sentence: If you were given five minutes to work out in detail what others spent 5 years building, how would you split this answer into its partial fraction expansion?

?/5. Invaluable, for a tiny number of people.

JUNE 2016

- *Hitch-22* (2009) by Christopher Hitchens. Stylish and consequential. He spread word of the most terrible injustices of his day; was arrested by several authoritarian regimes; he wrote three original, important books (on Teresa, Kissinger and Orwell); he had a lot of fun. That's a good life. Why, then, are we so uneasy? Because of his changing his mind so forcefully about revolution? About America? Because his direct, tactless opposition to conservative Islam sounds vaguely similar to that of contemporary racists? Because he found Thatcher sexy?

He raised my estimation of the British 'International Socialists' (i.e. Trots) of the 1960s by a giant interval: though nearly powerless and outnumbered on all sides, they really did resist both the US and Soviet empires *and* the humourlessness and cultishness of their peers, *and* post-modern, Foucaultian passivity, and really did manage to help in undramatic ways (fundraising, letter-writing, war tourism). Bravura. On some points Hitchens didn't change at all; the Left did:

[In 1968] people began to intone the words “The Personal Is Political”. The instant that I first heard this deadly expression, I knew as one does from the utterance of any sinister bullshit that it was very bad news. From now on, it would be enough to a member of a sex or gender, or epidermal subdivision, or erotic “preference”, to qualify as a revolutionary. In order to begin a speech or ask a question from the floor, all that would be necessary by way of preface would be the words, “Speaking as a...” Then could follow any self-loving description. I will have to say this for the old “hard” Left: we earned our claim to speak and intervene by right of experience and sacrifice and work. It would never have done for any of us to stand up and say that our sex or sexuality or pigmentation or disability were qualifications in themselves. There are many ways of dating the moment where the Left lost or – I would prefer to say – discarded its moral advantage, but this was the first time I was to see the sell-out so cheaply.

the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwah... was, if I can phrase it like this, a matter of everything I hated versus everything I loved. In the hate column: dictatorship, religion, stupidity, demagogic, censorship, bullying, and intimidation. In the love column: literature, irony, humor, the individual, and the defense of free expression... To re-state the premise of the argument again: the theocratic head of a foreign despotism offers money in his own name in order to suborn

the murder of a civilian citizen of another country, for the offense of writing a work of fiction. No more root-and-branch challenge to the values of the Enlightenment (on the bicentennial of the fall of the Bastille) or to the First Amendment to the Constitution, could be imagined.

I had become accustomed to the pseudo-Left new style, whereby if your opponent thought he had identified your lowest possible motive, he was quite certain that he had isolated the only real one. This vulgar method, which is now the norm and the standard in much non-Left journalism as well, is designed to have the effect of making any noisy moron into a master analyst.

Today I want to puke when I hear the word 'radical' applied so slothfully and stupidly to Islamist murderers; the most plainly reactionary people in the world.

But never mind that. Lots of gossip, lots of travel writing, lots of quotation from the heart, lots of interesting digressions about the old New Left, nationalisms, Jewishness - have you ever heard of the Haskalah? - and two massive eulogies to his dear friends James Fenton and Martin Amis. Everything he said and did from the age of about 18 proceeded from a fully-developed worldview: sarcastic, elevated, British post-Marxist intellectuality. He becomes the Hitchens you know - the drawling, boozy pal of neocons, more Dawkins than Dawkins is ("Everything about Christianity is contained in the pathetic image of 'the flock'.") - late on in life and even later in the book, so even if you refuse to forgive him his shocking, *but internally consistent* transformations, it doesn't warp the weft. Beautiful despite crudeness; very modern in several clashing senses.

In one sentence: The establishment's awful, until you get well in it.

4/5.

- **Plato at the Googleplex** (2014) by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein. It is very hard to say anything new about Plato. Except, of course it isn't, because he spoke in the most general possible terms, and the world continues to do unprecedented things and so allow for new commentary and new applications of Plato. It will always be possible to say something new about Plato because, until the heat death draws near, it will be possible to say something new about the world, and

criticism should relate the old but general with the new and unanalysed.

This was really deep fun: Goldstein debunks a great deal about him via close-reading (e.g.: that Plato's book, *Republic* / Πολιτεία, has no etymological or structural relation to modern republics). Some very moving chapters, too, particularly the neuroscientist dialogue: she renders this man we know almost nothing personal about as polite, curious and modest, willing to suspend judgment on e.g. our popular democracy. The titular chapter is best, involving the philosopher wrestling with one highly imperfect implementation of his epistemocracy, the data-mining Silicon Valley engineer:

"You're telling me that the purpose of all of this knowledge is merely to make money? Greed is driving the great search engine for knowledge? This bewilders me... How can those who possess all knowledge, which must include the knowledge of the life most worth living, be interested in using knowledge only for the insignificant aim of making money?"

"Plato, I said, I think you have a somewhat exalted view of Google and the nerds who work here."

"Nerds?" he said. "Another word I do not know."

Well, again I was in a somewhat awkward position, since I didn't want to offend Plato, who struck me, despite his eye contact and excellent manners, as a nerd par excellence. So I fell back on something I'd once heard... that the word was originally "knurd", which is "drunk" spelled backwards, and was used for students who would rather study than party.

"And the people who work here at Google are all nerds?"

"I would say each and every one." I smiled at him.

He smiled and looked around the café as if he had died and gone to philosophers' heaven.

"My chosen term for nerd", he said, "is philosopher-king".

Goldstein's move for each chapter is to draw out an inconsistency in Plato that later became a persistent philosophical dichotomy; the chapters are all classical dialogues, actually trialogues at least. Also she makes us note how little explanation of modern culture Plato would actually need to be able to deploy his existing arguments. Witty and persuasive. (You'd think I'd need no persuading of the eternal value of philosophy, and nor do I, but I'd no intention of studying Plato properly before this.)

In one sentence: Plato wanders contemporary America, Chromebook tucked under his arm, looking to understand the few ways we are radically different.

- ***The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*** (1946) by Ruth Benedict. War anthropology! That is, anthropology conducted by the opposite side of a total war, for predictive military purposes of the highest consequence. She was of course robbed of the moral superiority of field work by an ocean and a bunch of tanks and whatnot, so this is all based on expat interviews and extremely secondary sources. I'm still struggling to overcome my deep suspicion of cultural anthropology; thus I was actively drawn to Benedict by this hatchet job, by a modern relativist anthropologist.

Sadly the book's only ok, very nicely written but falsely general. She introduces the key terms of the toxic wartime Inazo-Satsuma-Shōwa ideology, but mislabels this particular modernist system as "the Japanese worldview". Even so, in the one truly essential passage, Benedict lays out (and later tries to ameliorate) a popular reified caricature of the Japanese: as morbid, conformist, and paradoxical:

the Japanese have been described in the most fantastic series of '...but also's' ever used for any nation of the world. When a serious observer is writing about peoples other than the Japanese and says they are unprecedentedly polite, he is not likely to add, 'But also insolent and overbearing.' When he says people of some nation are incomparably rigid in their behaviour, he does not add, 'But they also adapt themselves readily to extreme innovations'. When he says a people are submissive, he does not explain too that they are not easily amenable to control from above... When he says they act mostly out of concern for others' opinions, he does not then go on to tell that they have a truly terrifying conscience... When he writes a book on a nation with a popular cult of aestheticism which gives high honor to actors and to artists and lavishes art upon the cultivation of chrysanthemums, that book does not ordinarily have to be supplemented by another which is devoted to the cult of the sword and the top prestige of the warrior... All these contradictions, however, are the warp and woof of books on Japan. They are true. Both the sword and the chrysanthemum are a part of the picture. The Japanese are to the highest degree, both aggressive and unaggressive, both militaristic and aesthetic, both insolent and polite, rigid and adaptable, submissive and resentful of being pushed around, loyal and treacherous, brave and timid, conservative and hospitable to new ways.

People say she made this worse, but you can't claim that she didn't know something was up with the Western concepts used. There's an intriguing suggestion that the book is actually a satire (Geertz: "*The Chrysanthemum and the Sword is no more a prettied-up science-without-tears policy tract than [Gulliver's Travels] is a children's book.*") . But she actually was attached to military intelligence at the time and actually interviewed Japanese-American internees, and I find I don't much care either way.

In one sentence: The above passage with a question mark on it.

3*/5.

- ***The Donald Richie Reader*** (2001) by Donald Richie, ed. someone else so that's ok. The greatest *gaijin*? Famous for introducing Japan's incredible cinema to the West, but actually fewer than half of his thoughts are anything to do with that. Richie has an eC20th directness about describing other peoples - think Martha Gellhorn or Kipling - their pure skin, their atrocity-enabling 'innocence', their circuitousness and tribalism - which directness causes a frisson in the present climate. (It is now sometimes inappropriate, sometimes oppressive to emphasise differences so.)

I cannot imagine Plato thriving here, with all his absolutes ("the truth," "the beauty")... Maybe that is why Japan is so backward (by comparison) in some areas: philosophy, diagnosis. And perhaps why it is so forward in others.

From the celebrated farting-contest scroll and the early illustrated He Gassen (The Fart Battle), up to such recent representations as the delightful farting games in Ozu Yasujiro's Ohayo, Japan's culture is filled with vivid examples... Farting is certainly included in the nature of man:

*"And what is it you all
Are laughing at, may I ask?"
The retired master's fart.*

*Four or five people
Inconvenienced
By the horse farting
The long ferry ride.*

Just here, I think, is the difference in attitude between Japan and the West. That a thing is sufficient to warrant its notice, even celebration. The hypocrisy of the idealistic has not until recently infected Japan: In both cultures the fart is funny but only in Japan is its humanity acknowledged. This entails a full acceptance of the human state. There is even a rubric for such matters, the ningen-kusai ("smelling of humanity") and within it the hé (屁) takes an honorable place.

What do I want to be when I grow up? An attractive role would be that of the bunjin. He is the Japanese scholar who wrote and painted in the Chinese style, a literatus, something of a poetaster - a pose popular in the 18th century. I, however, would be a later version, someone out of the end of the Meiji, who would pen elegant prose and work up flower arrangements from dried grasses and then encourage spiders to make webs and render it all natural. For him, art is a moral force and he cannot imagine life without it. He is also the kind of casual artist who, after a day's work is done, descends into his pleasure park and dallies.

Similar to Hitchens in its consistent, adventurous aestheticism, though with much quieter prose; however, neither has that certain Alastair Reid transcendence. Minus a half for seriously ugly layout and typography, but I will seek out his real books.

In one sentence: Ah, so innocent, so subtle, so far away from Ohio.

4/5.

- **The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse** (600BCE - 2000CE) ed. Geoffrey Bownas. I feel able to say it at last: the haiku is a pathological genre, absolutely limited to the pretentious engraving of flat single images. A single verbal image does nothing for me; it is relation and juxtaposition and story and reductio and original presentation that give images life. And the haiku leaves almost no room for these. (This is not about length; the *senryu* retains wonderful possibilities, because they are animated by satire rather than po-faced nature-worship. Jokes can stand alone.)

This book cannot be blamed for being half haiku, because its mechanical law ruled Japanese poetry for thousands of years and this is first of all a historical selection. Lots more to see. Currently I am only fond of the ancient gnostic

hermits and the droll postwar internationalists (no multi-culturalists here). Many of the others emote at us too directly - "Oh how // I miss my wife // out here // on the border wall" - which brittle superficiality fails Wei Tai's test and mine. In general their ancients have dated much better than ours, perhaps because they grokked ironic minimalism a thousand years before us. The emperors and shoguns all write poetry, are still all required to profess about the land that they perch upon. Meiji:

*In newspapers, all see
the doings of the world,
which lead nowhere.
Better never written!*

Amen. I liked Yamanoue Okura, Yakamochi, the Kokinshū, Ki Tsurayuki, Tsuboi Shigeji, Kaneko Mitsuhara, Takahashi Mutsuo. I absolutely do not have sufficient knowledge to stop there. Skip Bownas' enormous Preface too, you don't need it.

In one sentence: 無.

?/5.

I classify

I classify tales, names, seasons, food, books, trees, geography, places, sounds, smells, time, plants, animals, minerals, people, insects, bodies, astronomy, cosmos, weather, numbers, Chinese characters, vocabulary, grammar, stimuli, shapes, conduct, actions, sex, person, devils, communication, greetings, calendars, pleasure, pain, rhythm, phonemes, medicines, fibres, furniture, ornaments, light, scenery, discourse, likes, dislikes

I classify

- tales:* those with endings, those without
names: those that can be remembered, those that cannot, whispers in the ear, names that always tremble pleasantly on the lips and those that do not
seasons: spring which gently eliminates people, summer with its brilliant pain, autumn burning the tea plants so that roadside trees are dyed yellow, autumn for ever damp, winter with closed doors
food: raw, rotten, cooked, solids and liquids, sweet and sour, nutritious and not nutritious
books: by number only
trees: giant trees, those that hug the ground, those that grow into layered shapes, those that do not drink water
geography: mountain ranges at night, the sea rioting, rivers branching, blood-sucking soil, blood-spitting soil, isolated tropical islands, places where the sea is visible and not visible
places: here and not here, thin closed rooms and thick closed rooms
sounds: grainy and not grainy, those that attract and those that repel
smells: the smell of morning fruit and water at night

I classify

likes and dislikes, me and you, or that which is me and that which is you, or

- Asabuki Ryōji



(c) "Cross References" (2003) by Jonathan Wolstenholme

Some people try to do something noble with their bodies: they try to have their bodies have some use after they're dead, which I think is a good thought. You're only borrowing your body. You're only borrowing everything. If your body's worth anything when you're done with it you should pass it on, that's something I really believe.

I mean, ok I'm not gonna do it, because I don't want - Ewww! No! It's mine! : I have a lot of beliefs, and I live by none of em. That's just the way I am. They're just my beliefs; I just like believing them. I like that part! They're my little believies, they make me feel good about who I am! But if they get in the way of a thing I want, or I want to jack off or something...

– Louis CK

Science is the optimum belief system, because we have the error bar, the greatest invention of mankind. It is a pictorial representation of our glorious undogmatic uncertainty in our results, uncertainty which science is happy to confront and work with. Show me a politician's speech, or a religious text, or a news article, with an error bar next to it.

– Ben Goldacre

Decent haul. Was on holiday, which always makes me feel restless and foolish and eager to flee myself in books; and I was later perked up by a big new job and big new city.

JULY 2016

- *I think you'll find it's a bit more complicated than that* (2014) by Ben Goldacre. A hundred clear, witty, and literate attacks on the agreeable nonempiricism of alternative medicine, journalism, and politics and policy. His website is a bit ugly but has most of this content for free. The extras in this volume are oddities for fans: an undergraduate paper of his, BMJ editorials and notes from his heartening rise into the British policy establishment (he is a public health researcher at the NHS). I was again refreshed and uplifted. Goldacre is that rare thing, someone doing the best work they possibly could be.

5?/5.

- *Travelers of a Hundred Ages: The Japanese as Revealed Through 1,000 Years of Diaries* (1989) by Donald Keene. Bought this expecting a book of diaries; instead it is a book of essays *about* diaries, with fairly sparse quotations from the diaries I wanted to read. My rating may be undiluted petulance, as a result.

2/5.

- *The Nice and the Good* (1968) by Iris Murdoch. A joy, a dirge, *and* so sincere I cried. Both a tame London murder mystery and a sliding-doors comedy of manners in Dorset, the two plots dreaming each other, running laminar. These mere genres are electrified by Murdoch's ethics and filled up with her wit. Like Greene, she is the apotheosis of trash conventions. I feel I am a better person afterward, or at least a better fool. The following derives its power from 200 pages of buildup suddenly letting loose, but it might give you an idea:

Jealousy is the most natural to us of the really wicked passions... It must be resisted with every honest cunning and with deliberate generous thoughts, however abstract and empty these may seem in comparison with that wicked strength. Think about the virtue that you need and call it generosity, magnanimity, charity. You are young, Jessica, and you are very delightful – may I just take your hand, so? – and the world is not spoilt for you yet. There is no merit, Jessica, in a faithfulness which is poison to you and captivity to him. You have nothing to gain here except by losing. You wish to act out your

love, to give it body, but there is only one act left to you that is truly loving and that is to let him go, gently and without resentment. Put all your, energy into that and you will win from the world of the spirit a grace which you cannot now even dream of. For there is grace, Jessica, there are principalities and powers, there is unknown good which flies magnetically toward the good we know. And suppose that you had found what you were looking for, my dear child? Would you not have been led on from jealousy through deceit into cruelty? Human frailty forms a system, Jessica, and faults in the past have their endlessly spreading network of results. We are not good people, Jessica, and we shall always be involved in that great network, you and I. All we can do is constantly to notice when we begin to act badly, to check ourselves, to go back, to coax our weakness and inspire our strength, to call upon the names of virtues of which we know perhaps only the names. We are not good people, and the best we can hope for is to be gentle, to forgive each other and to forgive the past...

An essay on the benefits and limits of polyamory; on the trials of self-conscious virtue; an extended gag about virtue's unlikeability. I love the appalling drawling fops Octavian and Kate, I love the notably indistinct Fivey, and I clutch Ducane to myself like a home-knitted scarf against strong winter wind. So pure!

4*/5.

- **Fermat's Last Theorem** (1997) by Simon Singh. Good. Lucid in many places ("any logic which relies on a conjecture is conjecture"). Does well in using plain language to communicate some of the exciting complexity and dismaying complication of higher maths - But not as well as ...

3*/5.

- **The Man Who Knew Infinity** (1991) by Robert Kanigel. One of the best biographies I've ever read. (The subtitle says it is about Ramanujan, but it is equally about Hardy, that perfect British intellect: more crystalline than Russell, more lofty than Moore, more self-critical than Hare, more fun than anyone, loveable atop it all.) Ramanujan's story is of course maximally moving to anyone with a shred of curiosity or pity. The most moving part of all is an absence, one of the darker thoughts among all thoughts:

How many Ramanujans, his life begs us to ask, dwell in India today, unknown and unrecognized? And how many in America and Britain, locked away in racial or economic ghettos, scarcely aware of worlds outside their own?

His research is patent throughout: he decodes South Indian religion and cuisine, British upper-class slang, and even something of the impressiveness of higher mathematics, while using mere natural language:

Ramanujan's work grants direct pleasure to only a few - a few hundred mathematicians and physicists around the world, perhaps a few thousand. The rest of us must either sit on the sidelines, and, on the authority of the cognoscenti, cheer - or else rely on vague, metaphoric, and necessarily imprecise glimpses of his work.

...mathematics is not best learned passively; you don't sop it up like a romance novel. You've got to go out to it, aggressive, and alert, like a chess master pursuing checkmate.

Ramanujan himself left a tiny dense literature that we are still decoding:

Ramanujan's notebooks formed a distinctly idiosyncratic record. In them even widely standardized terms sometimes acquired new meaning. Thus, an "example" — normally, as in everyday usage, an illustration of a general principle — was for Ramanujan often a wholly new theorem. A "corollary" — a theorem flowing naturally from another theorem and so requiring no separate proof — was for him sometimes a generalization, which did require its own proof. As for his mathematical notation, it sometimes bore scant resemblance to anyone else's.

Many passages raise goosebumps: Kanigel unites the abstract and the bodily, the true and the human all-too-human.

You cannot say much about Ramanujan without resorting to the word self. He was self-willed, self-directed, self-made. Some might conceivably label him selfish for his preoccupation with doing the mathematics he loved without any great concern for the better of his family or his country...

Hardy discovered Ramanujan? Not at all: a glance at the facts of 1912 shows that Ramanujan discovered Hardy.

A life-giving book.

4*/5

- **A Very Short Introduction to: Modern Japan** (2009) by Christopher Goto-Jones. Terribly written, with the glib say-what-you're-going-to-say structure, cod psychology and thoughtless overreach common in social theory.

Japan retreated into a state of denial... Can a nation's [unacknowledged] past make its people ill, in the same way as repressed memories make individuals ill?

No and no they don't. But he gives a brief and clear sketch from Edo to their World Cup; still helpful if you are a total novice like me. (Never knew the shogunate were the internationalists in the Meiji struggle!) Needless to say Goto-Jones is unable to step beyond C20th stereotypes - to note, for instance, that by time of writing Japan had likely stopped being the place the future happens first.

2/5.

- **The Magus** (1965) by John Fowles. Contemptible, but worth reading: it gets really good around page 450. The way there is a slog: the de Sade epigrams, the unreflective Freudianism, this:

It was Greece again, the Alexandrian Greece of Cavafy; there were only degrees of aesthetic pleasure; of beauty in decadence. Morality was a North European lie.

Snobbery, delusion, bad sex, worse chat, and the limits of reason: Ladies and gentlemen: we were The Existentialists!

Not a patch on Alain-Fournier, nor on *Lanark*, nor Biyo Casares. The eponymous sage is not sagacious, just imperious. I liked the vignettes that show Conchis' personality as a stolen (or put-on) patchwork of people he had met in his life (the nasty aesthete Comte, the mad Norwegian mystic, the Nazi firing squad). It took quite a long time for me to realise that Fowles might not endorse the nasty blithering of basically every character. (The book seems to have Bad Fans and Bad Haters who never realise this.)

My monstrous crime was Adam's, the oldest and most vicious of all male selfishness: to have imposed the role I needed from Alison on her real self.

Anyway my time was recompensed by the great big postmodern explosion of the last 150 pages. Some very lovely passages throughout too:

The bowed head, the buried face. She is silent, she will never speak, never forgive, never reach a hand, never leave this frozen present tense. All waits, suspended. Suspended the autumn trees, the autumn sky, anonymous people. A blackbird, poor fool, sings out of season from the willows by the lake. A flight of pigeons over the houses; fragments of freedom, hazard, an anagram made flesh. And somewhere the stinging smell of burning leaves.

The ending, so easily hated, does not strike me as meaning "to win love eternal, go on just hit her in the face", despite appearances. It is rather a parting stab at your opinion of Nicholas, a big Straussian dischord thrown into the supposed perfect cadence of the godgame people's efforts; Lily's grand second commandment dissolves suddenly, saltily, and then: a warm mist descends. Go guess. If you're a glutton for philosophical dialogues and *Truman Show* recursions:

3*/5

AUGUST 2016

- **The Three-Body Problem** by Liu Cixin, trans. Ken Liu. Dense, clever and conveying a pleasant worldview; but also rushed and very clumsy. In fact the prose is awful - full of flat descriptions of people's expressions, people's full names inserted into the dialogue - and the characters are completely interchangeable ciphers (apart from the one who is a stock renegade cop, and the one who is the Ultimate Eco-Terrorist).

Can the fundamental nature of matter really be lawlessness? Can the stability and order of the world be but a temporary dynamic equilibrium achieved in a corner of the universe, a short-lived eddy in a chaotic current?

For most people, perhaps time would have gradually healed these wounds. After all, during the Cultural Revolution, many people suffered fates similar to hers, and compared to many of them, Ye was relatively fortunate. But Ye had the mental habits of a scientist, and she refused to forget. Rather, she looked with a rational gaze on the madness and hatred that had harmed her. Ye's rational consideration of humanity's evil side began the day she read Silent Spring.

This is no impediment to good hard scifi, it just means that the reference author is Asimov, not Banks or LeGuin. Liu's ideas are well worth the trip - firing at a nuke as a last-resort for disarming it (since the small ones rely on a sealed pressurised container) is about the least ambitious thought in it:

Twenty minutes later, Three Body's Von Neumann architecture human-formation computer had begun full operations under the Qin 1.0 operating system. "Run solar orbit computation software 'Three Body 1.0'!" Newton screamed at the top of his lungs. "Start the master computing module! Load the differential calculus module! Load the finite element analysis module! Load the spectral method module! Enter initial condition parameters ... and begin calculation!" The motherboard sparkled as the display formation flashed with indicators in every color. The human computer began the long computation.

In the long history of scientific progress, how many protons have been smashed apart in accelerators by physicists? How many neutrons and electrons? Probably no fewer than a hundred million. Every collision was probably the end of the civilizations and intelligences in a microcosmos.

*Comrades! Revolutionary youths! Revolutionary faculty and staff!
We must clearly understand the reactionary nature of Einstein's
theory of relativity. This is most apparent in general relativity: Its
static model of the universe negates the dynamic nature of matter. It
is anti-dialectical! It treats the universe as limited, which is
absolutely a form of reactionary idealism...*

I don't understand why this won the Hugo - except, that, being foreign, it didn't trigger canned political backlash on either side of the sad affair we have made the Hugos. Tom Clancy for real nerds.

3/5 in this translation.

- **A Structured Approach to the Adam Smith Problem** (2016) by Christopher Hodder. The third PhD I have ever read, the first to which I've contributed, and certainly the most well-written. "The "Adam Smith Problem" is just that Smith's two big books seem to dramatically contradict each other: *WoN* is methodologically and normatively individualist and abstracts out the economy from the rest of human life, but *ToMS* is a holistic and altruistic picture, one which subsumes economic behaviour as a special case of all virtuous or vicious actions. Hodder's job, which, remarkably, went undone over 200 years of scholarly debate, is to consider the possible explanations (e.g. "Smith divides society into disjoint private and public spheres"; "one of the two books is ironic"; "he changed his mind"; "he was a idjit") through close exegesis and logical reconstruction, and somehow weigh them.

The conclusion is satisfying enough: *What is the Adam Smith Problem?: A debate on a problem; the debate was the problem*. Basically, a series of bad readers (from the German Historicists to Paul Samuelson) misread certain key terms and passages, imputed an anachronistic atheism and efficient-causation empiricism to him, and then propagated a straw-man ("a shadow history") throughout the secondary literature and the tertiary sewer we call the media. (They also missed the timing and the explicit initial audience of *WoN*: the book is avowedly a polemic to affect British trade policy, and a highly successful one at that.)

Hodder writes with absolutely minimal jargon; this is as easily grasped as C18th political economy can be. One of my notes was that an institutionalised marker

might penalise it for omitting jargon to the degree it does; after all, what's the point if just anyone can waltz in to constructive thought without using the gaudy tools made in desperation by knowledge pieceworkers?:

Sympathy plays a far more foundational role in WN than has previously been noted by any scholar which I have encountered. If we return to the butcher, brewer and baker, example, where we address ourselves not to their benevolence but to their self-interest, all commentators seem to have overlooked the question of how we are to go about addressing ourselves to another's self-interest. The obvious and simple answer to this is Sympathy. We put ourselves in their place, we realise that they expect to be paid for their labour as we would expect to be paid for our own, and as a result we understand that the appropriate behaviour expected of us is to pay for their service. In the primitive society, where the hunter begins to trade his bows for food and starts down the long road towards commercial society, it must be Sympathy which alerts his fellow hunters that he wants something in return for the bows he produces. "Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want" requires that I can escape my own self-interest and understand what you want, and have at least a basic level of Sympathy for you otherwise I would not know what to offer you.

Sympathy must therefore apply to trade at a very foundational level, and that intimate Sympathy which fosters benevolence can take hold even in business relationships. All it requires is repeated dealings with the same person, and a character which is "well-disposed". It is not said to be central to society - but this is entirely consistent with TMS, where Smith describes benevolence as "the ornament that embellishes" society, that which makes it happier rather than merely efficient.

Without faulting Hodder, I do wonder at the fact that someone with no historiographical background and only half an economics degree could make substantive corrections and suggestions at the very frontier of the field's knowledge of a *canonical figure*. In one way this is nice: reason is a universal solvent, and specific facts make up relatively little of total intellectual work! But in another way sad: the pompousness and boundary-work of the non-formal academic fields is again shown to be needless, and narrowing.

4/5.

- A lot of 1960s newspaper articles and court reports for this odd endeavour.

2/5.

- ***What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*** (1999) by Charles Bukowski. Bukowski's poems are just a man in a room. Odd that this is enough to make people read them voluntarily, religiously, unlike almost all contemporary poetry (with their bigger brains and better politics and more eventful stories and uplifting messages).

5/5.

- ***Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia*** (2015) by Peter Pomerantsev. Anecdotal evidence of the new culture, orchestrated and predicated upon by an amoral mafia state. In a phrase: Oil-wealth pomo medievalism. Postmodern dictatorship unnerves me far more than the clumsy fascism of the Ba'ath or Juche. It is one thing to steal almost everything from your people; one thing to demean, torture and murder millions; one thing to employ solid portions of the entire country as rabid, unaccountable secret police; Even if you do all of this, your people still know you are evil, and long for your death. It says something about me that the perversion of meaning, the co-optation of important language, and the erasure of the possibility of objectivity is more emotionally taxing to me than straightforward torture kleptocracy ("say what you want about the tenets of National Socialism, Dude...").

The most appalling figure in this long list is Vladislav Surkov. He is at first hard to credit as real: think Russell Brand crossed with Don Draper crossed with Laurentii Beria. His exploits sound like totally mental conspiracy theories, but are actually open secrets:

... the office of the presidential administration, where Surkov would sit behind a desk with phones bearing the names of all the “independent” party leaders, calling and directing them at any moment, day or night. The brilliance of this new type of authoritarianism is that instead of simply oppressing opposition, as had been the case with twentieth-century strains, it climbs inside all ideologies and movements, rendering them absurd. One moment Surkov would fund civic forums and human rights NGOs, the next he would quietly support nationalist movements that accuse the NGOs

of being tools of the West. With a flourish he sponsored lavish arts festivals for the most provocative modern artists in Moscow, then supported Orthodox fundamentalists, dressed all in black and carrying crosses, who in turn attacked the modern art exhibitions...

The book is *all* anecdote. He does state some statistics, without sourcing; the book has no footnotes. We need to do better than this, what with the Kremlin's internet troll army. It is journalism, then, not social theory: a picture of a hundred of so individuals, high and low. Russia is so skewed that one can capture important things about by focussing on the ultra-powerful, though: Berezovsky and Putin, Surkov and Deripaska. He views "international development consultants" as bumbling, ineffective ambassadors of our best side. He is very glib with attributing daddy issues, as if people's psychology were that straightforward or as if Freud were that credible. His prose has the distracting, unbalanced sentences of indifferently translated work ("*out to make a few quick quid*", "*developers steal so much money during construction that even the most VIP, luxury, elite of the skyscrapers cracks and sink ever so quickly*"). The drama of it all is wearing: he was a Channel 4-style hack documentarian before becoming a respected literary insider.

But this is good, outraging and intelligent (e.g. he takes for granted that we will understand the contrast between Kaliningrad as the home of Kant *and* grand larceny and sleaze). A small salvo of authenticity against the Kremlin's apparent wall of disinformation and corruption.

4/5.

- ***Revelation Space*** (2000) by Alastair Reynolds. Sterile prose but still very readable goth space opera. Simmonsian - "Stoners" and "shroudiers". Herbertian atavism and castes. Ideas are good - but I compare everyone's ideas to Banks and Stross. POV switches way too frequently - sometimes on every other page. This produces glibness. The narrative takes a series of 10 year slips, or 22 year slips, between scenes, which produces agreeable disorientation. Notable because of its lack of play on human nature: Reynolds' people, no matter how bionic or brainwashed by aliens, are just us in different places. Also same politics and same weapons. Aliens properly alien. Absolutely incredible denouement, best in recent memory.

3*/5.

SEPTEMBER 2016

- **Doing Good Better** (2015) by Will MacAskill. Best in class. (The class is "pop philosophy aimed at changing the world".) What you should do if you want to improve the world as much as you can: that is, he skips the soapbox moral suasion and spends the whole time explaining his impressive framework for getting shit done. (Includes a defence of foreign aid, achieving in two pages what my dissertation limped over the course of 40.) His rubric for assessing the optimality of an act is:
 1. How many people does A affect, and by how much? (Magnitude)
 2. Is A the best thing to do? (Relative magnitude; opportunity cost)
 3. What's the difference my doing A makes? (Effect minus counterfactual effect)
 4. What's the difference that one more A makes, on the margin? (Marginal benefit)
 5. How sure is A to help? What harms does A risk? (Risk)

Too plainly written for my liking, but then it's not for me: it's for everyone.

4*/5.

- Reread: **New Year Letter** (1940) by WH Auden. 800 heroic couplets written off the cuff for a friend. Pompous, showy, and forced: I love his idiocies, I love his verse footnotes, which are as long as the original poem again and arraying all his beetling, piecemeal research into *his* age at least: cell biology, crank psychoanalysis, early sociology, Nietzsche, Nietzsche, all the arts and sciences nominally in his pocket. Anyway half of the idiocy is forced on him by the genre, epic verse, which always sounds damn silly to me (not that I mind silliness in my high art, but I do mind people being silly and not admitting it):

*Tonight a scrambling decade ends,
And strangers, enemies and friends
Stand once more puzzled underneath
The signpost on the barren heath
Where the rough mountain track divides...*

A weary Asia out of sight

*Is tugging gently at the night,
Uncovering a restless race;
Clocks shoo the childhood from its face,
And accurate machines begin
To concentrate its adults in
A narrow day to exercise
Their gifts in some cramped enterprise.
How few pretend to like it: O,
Three quarters of these people know
Instinctively what ought to be
The nature of society
And how they'd live there if they could.
If it were easy to be good,
And cheap, and plain as evil, how
We all would be its members now...*

*How grandly would our virtues bloom
In a more conscionable dust
Where Freedom dwells because it must,
Necessity because it can,
And men confederate in Man.
But wishes are not horses, this
Annus is not mirabilis;
Day breaks upon the world we know
Of war and wastefulness and woe...*

*The New Year brings an earth afraid,
Democracy a ready-made
And noisy tradesman's slogan, and
The poor betrayed into the hand
Of lackeys with ideas, and truth
Whipped by their elders out of youth,
The peaceful fainting in their tracks
With martyrs' tombstones on their backs,
And culture on all fours to greet
A butch and criminal elite,
While in the vale of silly sheep
Rheumatic old patricians weep...*

One critic, screwing up all his strength, called Auden's bad style, which NYL is supposed to be an instance of, "snide bright jargon", which is a perfect compliment! (if you don't view limpid repetition of what every other sensitive outsider has said before you as poetry's point.) I've not read it alone on New Year's Eve like you ought to, but I will.

5/5.

- **Programming Pig** (2011) by Alan Gates. Another totally readable introduction to something new, without a full StackOverflow safety net yet. (Pig is very good, like an imperative, Pythonic SQL: an omnivorous abstraction over MapReduce with Pythonic data structures, optional Java typing, optional schema declaration, fully extensible in Java, Python, etc. Pig is not Turing-complete, but offers several no-fuss ways to extend and delegate, including this beam of sunlight. I'm porting a bunch of SAS and MapReduce code into Pig Latin atm; the job can sometimes be done in 10 times fewer lines.) However, I read this in the slightly dazed and impermeable way that I read anything I am to read for work.

4/5.

[Free!]

- **Learn Python the Hard Way** (2011) by Zed Shaw. Much, much more my style - opinionated, joined-up, irreverent - though not my speed ("*this book gives you the mental tools and attitude you need to go through most Python books and actually learn something*"). Shaw is a beautiful mind housed in a slightly unhinged shell:

Which programming language you learn and use doesn't matter. Do not get sucked into the religion surrounding programming languages as that will only blind you to their true purpose of being your tool for doing interesting things.

Programming as an intellectual activity is the only art form that allows you to create interactive art. You can create projects that other people can play with, and you can talk to them indirectly. No other art form is quite this interactive. Movies flow to the audience in one direction. Paintings do not move. Code goes both ways.

Programming as a profession is only moderately interesting... You're much better off using code as your secret weapon in another profession... People who can code in biology, medicine, government, sociology, physics, history, and mathematics are respected and can do amazing things to advance those disciplines.

A good way to spend an hour after a year away.

3/5.

[Free!]

- ***The Establishment and how they get away with it*** (2015) by Owen Jones.

Begins very well:

'The Establishment' is a term that is often loosely used to mean "people with power whom I object to".

But this awareness didn't immunise him to self-service: instead of writing a book about just "the people with power", or "people who abuse their power", he focusses on one sort: the many cronies and neoliberals that cling to the country's upper reaches. The Jonesian Establishment consists of: fiscally conservative think tanks (but not powerful fiscally liberal ones); Old Boy MPs (but not originally working-class ones, however much they use the same revolving doors); the news media (but not himself, with 500,000 followers); the police; all corporate bosses; anything to do with the City.

This is only a problem because of his choice of term, which implies that his description covers all the powerful in Britain. (A big omission, for instance, are the unions. Unite and Unison have extremely frequent meetings with the most powerful politicians in the country - quite rightly - and have an incredibly strong role in selecting some of those people - quite dubiously. They sometimes use this power against the public interest, e.g. GMB propping up Trident. But they are not Establishment to Jones.⁵)

He is thinking clearly, and that's half the work in finding the truth, which is half the work in changing the world. But, above the level of reporting individual events, he is just not empirically reliable: he notes that the *Sun* has 3m readers and just assumes that this means they are all-powerful in elections. Actually the (British, C21st) media has little effect on election outcomes - they produce only 1-2% swings.⁶ A more general problem, endemic among progressives: Jones has a fundamentally *moral* conception of society's problems: "the poor primarily suffer because of the greed or cowardice or ignorance of our rulers.

Nationalisations and the £20 minimum wage would have no real downside."

5 I also wish he'd stop capitalising the damn word all the time, but I'm aware that's shallow.)

6 A belief in the brain-washing power of the media - to change voting behaviour, to instil sexism, to desensitise us to violence - is one of the defining quirks of the modern hard left, despite there being decent counter-evidence against each effect. *Percipi est esse.*

This is as opposed to the engineering conception, which sees the constraints, tradeoffs, and tries to design solutions with these in mind. Still, my sympathies are with people who get attacked on both sides of a war - in Jones' case, for being both naively idealistic about economics and democracy, *and* insufficiently radical and obedient to the party line. He bears some millstones, like his totally unanalysed use of the Left/Right divide (he prefaces every single bloody interview with bloody anyone with a binary tag, one way or the other).

Anyway this is good as very recent political history. (If you were paying attention to politics during the Noughties, then you maybe won't learn much new here, but it's a great primer for foreigners and younglings.) I was angry afterward, so clearly he is effective at his chosen task; god knows if political anger is what we need though. (I read a *lot* of non-data-driven nonfiction, god knows why. Maybe so my anger can be relevant at least, or in preparation for pseudos' dinner parties.)

4/5.

- **Herzog on Herzog** (2002) by Herzog and Cronin. Such a luminous person: contrived and dour and absurd, and yet charming and sincere. Here is him describing *one* 6 month block of his youth:

I ended up penniless and was pushed around from place to place for weeks until finally I was picked up on a country road by the Franklin family. The mother had six children between seventeen and twenty-seven, her husband had died and there was a ninety-three-year-old grandmother. I owe them so much, this wonderful, crazy family who put me up in an attic... Of course I needed to earn some money, so I started to work on a project that was part of a series of films for NASA. That I made films for NASA always appears on those five-line biographies, and even if it is somehow true, it is completely irrelevant. I did have access to certain restricted areas and was able to talk to many of the scientists, but just before I was about to start work on the film they ran a security check... It was evident I was about to be expelled from the country... so I took a rusty old Volkswagen and went to New York during a very bitter winter. I lived in the car for some time, even though its floor was rusted right through and I had a cast on my leg at the time because I had broken it quite badly after jumping out of a window... at night, when it gets cold, say at 3 or 4 a.m., the homeless of New York - who live almost like Neanderthal men - come and gather together on some empty,

utterly desolate street and stand over fires they have kindled in the metal rubbish bins without speaking a word. Eventually I just cut the whole cast off with poultry shears & fled to Mexico.

His whole life is lived with this undemonstrative fervour. However, the interviewer is completely uninspired: he just works his way stolidly through Herzog's back catalogue, with no insight into anything much ("*Precautions Against Fanatics* was your first colour film, a bizarre comedy set at a racetrack where various individuals feel it necessary to protect the animals from local 'fanatics'. Any comments?"); we are fortunate that Herzog is self-stimulating and full of himself. I'll just let him show you how good he is:

I have never been one of those who cares about happiness. Happiness is a strange notion. I am just not made for it. It has never been a goal of mine; I do not think in those terms. It seems to be a goal in life for many people, but I have no goals in life.

I am someone who takes everything very literally... I am like a Bavarian bullfrog just squatting there, brooding. I have never been capable of discussing art with people. I just cannot cope with irony. The French love to play with their words and to master French is to be a master of irony. Technically, I am able to speak the language - I know the words and verbs - but will do so only when I am really forced to.

I was forbidden to use fireworks. I told the army major that it was essential for the film. 'You'll be arrested,' he said. 'Then arrest me,' I said, 'but know that I will not be unarmed tomorrow. And the first man who touches me will drop down dead with me.' The next day there were fifty policemen and soldiers standing watching me work, plus a few thousand people from the town who wanted to see the fireworks. Of course, I was not armed, but how were they to know? Nobody complained or said anything... I learned very quickly that this was the very nature of filmmaking.

Everything he makes is worth your time.

4/5.

- **Intelligence** (2015) by Stuart Ritchie. Calm empirical rebuttal to 50 years of politicised ranting and ostriching. Incredibly clearly written, stopping short of off-puttingly plain.

(I wonder: Is the *g* theory of intelligence the most mature, replicated theory in

psychology? 100 years old and ever-replicating; language- and culture-blind by now; predictive of the highest human states and traits... What theories can compete? Operant conditioning, I guess. Libet on readiness potentials. But neither touch all of human life in the way IQ somehow does.)

Ritchie treads *very* lightly over the group differences part; but this is laudable in an introduction, since otherwise people would throw out all the settled and helpful noncontroversial truths that come before chapter 6. (This book is part of the "All that Matters" series, a coincidental subtitle which has no doubt enraged many people and caused him no end of grief.) I highly recommend his Twitter.

4/5.

- ***The Bald Prima Donna*** (1950) by Eugene Ionesco, translated by Donald Watson. Almost unmitigated shite. I suppose it might be just a satire of hollow, SO RANDOM surrealism? But apparently not - and either way it is not a good play. Plus a half for its structure (a continuous loop with new characters substituted in, taking on the same mannerisms and follies); plus a virtual half for maybe losing its wit in translation. I cannot remember the last time I binned a book (rather than risk anyone else wasting their time).
1.5/5.
- ***On Being a Data Skeptic*** (2014) by Cathy "Mathbabe" O'Neil. Extremely sane and salutary; along with MacAskill and Gates, this was one of the books I felt worth schematising, to hold its insights close; bullet list forthcoming. She appears to have taken a (book-selling?) pessimistic turn in the years since (but I haven't read that one yet).
4/5.
- ***The View from the Ground: Peacetime Dispatches*** (1931-1987) by Martha Gellhorn. My favourite reporter; a great, compulsive, austere, compassionate writer. Better than Fermor when happy, better than Orwell when irate. I am always interested in what she has to say about literally anything: this edition covers her peacetime reporting, which is to say her poverty-and-rubble-reconstruction reporting: Great Depression Deep South; the arts in Communist

Poland; the difficult path to democracy in Spain; Thatcher and the miners (...) She ranges over the whole sad half-century, bringing her maternal, judgmental, sardonic history to bear on what could otherwise have been ordinary journalism. Chastises communists and capitalists, liars, mercenaries and torturers of whatever justification. Never mentions her gender; she never let anyone stop her for any reason, let alone that.

Her natural compassion and fairness only cracks when it comes to Palestine; she contorts herself terribly in the face of shocking Nasserian anti-Semitism. It's *not* a whitewash; she talks to dozens of Palestinians in Jordan and Gaza, covers the Irgun and the bulldozers. But she is totally defensive about the Balfour Declaration and the Six Day War; is unusually eager to show up the many fibs of the Palestinian refugees (: confirmation bias); and excludes their self-determination alone among all the nations of the earth:

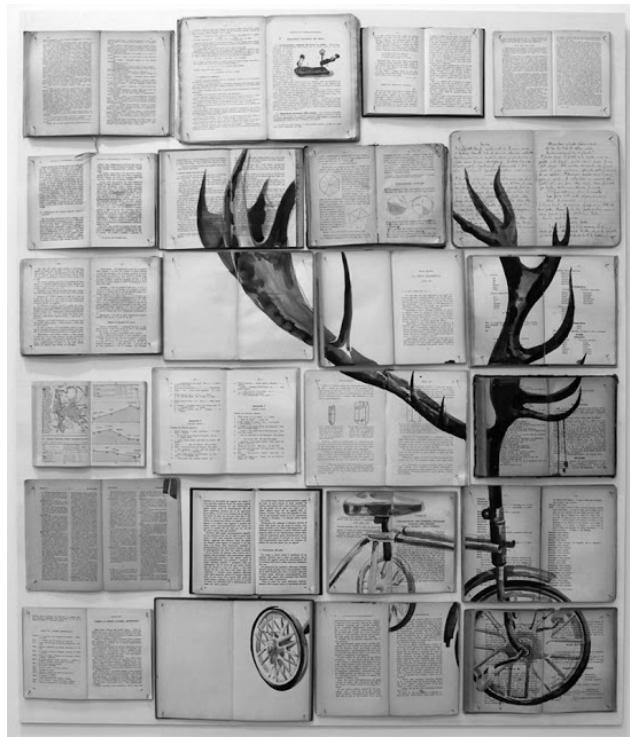
Arafat has had enough protection money from the oil Arabs to finance the education of two generations of young Palestinians, a chance to rise beyond the poverty of the camps into a good self-reliant life. Instead he has recruited two generations for training only in the use of guns and plastique, and insisted on a futile goal: Palestine for the Palestinians...

If I had been twenty years younger, I would have got myself to Vietnam somehow and joined the Vietcong, though handicapped by my height. Not much use for digging tunnels. Vietnam for the Vietnamese. Afghanistan for the Afghans. El Salvador for the Salvadorans. Nicaragua for the Nicaraguans. The inherent right of all peoples to self-determination. If they need civil war to determine how they shall be governed, that is their business and nobody else's.

How many deep inconsistencies are we allowed, before we stop being great? I don't know exactly, but more than one.

4*/5.

*O source of equity and rest...
Disturb our negligence and chill,
Convict our pride of its offence
In all things, even penitence,
Instruct us in the civil art
Of making from the muddled heart
A desert and a city where
The thoughts that have to labor there
May find locality and peace,
And pent-up feelings their release,
Send strength sufficient for our day,
And point our knowledge on its way.*



(c) Uno Due Tre Fuoco #3 (2012) by Ekaterina Panikanova

This page is related to that page. You're reading something constructed using a rhetorical practice, something informed both directly and indirectly by the entire history of composition up until this point, from the Sophists to Derrida. But you're navigating it using pure logical statements, using spans of text or images that, when clicked or selected, get other files and display them on your screen. The text is based in the rhetorical tradition; the links are based in the logical tradition; and somewhere in there is something worth figuring out.

...the entire history of Western pedagogy [is] an oscillation between these two traditions, between the tradition of rhetoric as a means for obtaining power — language as just a collection of interconnected signifiers co-relating, without a grounding in "truth," and the tradition of seeking truth, of searching for a fundamental, logical underpinning for the universe, using ideas like the platonic solids or Boolean logic, or tools like expert systems and particle accelerators ... what is the relationship between narratives and logic? What is sprezzatura for the web? Hell if I know. My way of figuring it all out is to build the system and write inside it, because I'm too dense to work out theories.

— Paul Ford

When the data-driven approach... did not lead to immediate success — and occasionally even when it did — it was open to attack in a way that the old approach to decision-making was not ...whatever it is in the human psyche — this

hunger for an expert who knows things with certainty, even when certainty is not possible — has a talent for hanging around. It's like a movie monster that's meant to have been killed but is somehow always alive for the final act.

— Michael Lewis

As well as my usual durability scores, I added in how each book is trying to affect you, using Julia Galef's types of books. Her model is that a book can offer you new Data, Theories to explain data, arguments for Values, or entire Thinking styles. She also assigns a number 1-5, roughly "Concreteness -> Generality". I should like Data books better than I apparently do.

OCTOBER 2016

- **So You've Been Publicly Shamed** (2015) by Jon Ronson. Actually important. What angry people are doing to jokers and liars and fools, generally on political grounds. A representative online shamer is interviewed, and you realise quickly that she is not especially hateful: she's just *dim* – e.g. she still thinks shaming is great, even after suffering it horribly and losing her job as a result of her own aggressive humourlessness and insensitivity. In her interview with Ronson, she shows no signs of empathy or learning. It is a tragic example of how addling identity can be.

Contains one essential passage, the payload in amongst Ronson's ordinariness and self-deprecation: a human-rights lawyer pointing out the emotional power of noncriminal acts:

“Let me ask you three questions,” he said. “And then you’ll see it my way. Question One: What’s the worst thing that you have ever done to someone? It’s okay. You don’t have to confess it out loud. Question Two: What’s the worst criminal act that has ever been committed against you? Question Three: Which of the two was the most damaging for the victim?”

The worst criminal act that has ever been committed against me was burglary. How damaging was it? Hardly damaging at all. I felt theoretically violated at

the idea of a stranger wandering through my house. But I got the insurance money. I was mugged one time. I was eighteen. The man who mugged me was an alcoholic. He saw me coming out of a supermarket. "Give me your alcohol," he yelled. He punched me in the face, grabbed my groceries, and ran away. There wasn't any alcohol in my bag. I was upset for a few weeks, but it passed.

And what was the worst thing I had ever done to someone? It was a terrible thing. It was devastating for them. It wasn't against the law.

Clive's point was that the criminal justice system is supposed to repair harm, but most prisoners — young, black — have been incarcerated for acts far less emotionally damaging than the injuries we noncriminals perpetrate upon one another all the time — bad husbands, bad wives, ruthless bosses, bullies, bankers.

(It has been claimed that this phase of internet social justice is on its way out - that the tactic is now to "call in"- that is, to correct an offender, but also to appeal to the offender's humanity, to try to bridge the gap. We can hope this will gain traction (3 years and counting...). In the meantime a roaring subculture has been founded upon the glorification of bad behaviour and utterly unpersuasive flames.)

Ronson investigates the possible solutions to finding yourself shamed: you can 1) refuse to feel bad (or at least refuse to show them you're bleeding), own the thing they're trying to shame you for, like Max Mosley. This only works sometimes. 2) You can hide from the internet, try to SEO the affair down to Google page 3, where no-one goes, like someone it would be counterproductive to name. 3) You can start over, asking for forgiveness like Jonah Lehrer. (There is none; the internet is not interested in you improving your behaviour.)

4/5.

[Library]

[Theory #3, Values #1]

- ***The Best Software Writing I*** (2003) ed. Joel Spolsky. Odd beast: a time capsule where half the items are of purely historical interest, and half are general and extremely wise arguments that are still not acted upon today. He had planned them to be annual collections, but they didn't happen, so this looks to represent more than one year's best. Recent enough to tell us something about the internet,

though with lots of anachronism. But it's more at the lexical level - "weblog", "Sociable media" - than the semantic.

Found (the eminent media researcher) danah boyd excessive and insulting: her whole schtick is to call developers autistic, and people with several online accounts as multiple-personality disordered (a person is one person. So all their activites have to be one person!) . Disappointing typical social theory. She aggressively pushes a risky single-sign-in for all sites based on hare-brained polemic and nothing else.

Contains helpful principles which will not age:, e.g. "if you can't understand the spec for a new technology, don't worry: nobody else will understand it either, and the technology won't be that important".

4/5

- **Strangers Drowning** by Larissa MacFarquhar. Engrossing, inspiring, deep. Full review here. (Wasn't an index in my Penguin copy; perhaps a sign of the ebook's dominance, since an index was always but a shadow of full-text search - or perhaps just another mild technical challenge on our way to having no boring tasks to do.)

5?/5.

[Data #2, Values #2]

- **Doing Data Science** (2014) by Cathy O'Neil and Kathryn Schutt. Really: *Talking About Data Science*; the equations and code samples in it are a fraction of the book. And that's ok! Two careful, socially conscious techies talking is nice, and you would never get the dozens of handy heuristics in this from a usual STEM textbook. Highly recommended for outsiders and newsiders.

4/5.

[Thinking #1, Theory 5 #2]

- **Forward Book of Poetry 2017** (2016) by Various. Mostly bad. I adore Harry Giles' verse; his big one, 'Brave', is a roaring, bouncing *Orlando Furioso* / Walt Whitman schtick with more point and verbal invention than the rest summed up, even with his *paist-apocalptic RPGs* slowing him down. The eventual winner,

Tiphanie Yanique, is particularly glib: an entire collection glorifying romantic insensitivity.

2/5.

[Library]

[Data #1, Values #3]

- **The Codeless Code** (2010) by "Qiless Qi". Parables about software development, violent and twee. Overwrought, and you can get them in a minute or two each time, unlike the bizarre originals which demand convoluted confabulation.

It is a passable instance of an important genre: the self-conscious *romanticisation and storification of highly abstract and highly novel things*. We need such things; otherwise those of us without internal wellsprings of meaning will find it boring, and will thus never excel; otherwise a culture will never grow, and nothing human lasts without growing a culture.

"Ah!", you say, "But Yudkowsky did just this, and got roundly mocked and called a cult leader and divers other bad things." Yes: that is the main tax we pay to be on the internet. I think of Yudkowsky as George Eliot thinks of Carlyle (though she hated him btw):

...the highest aim in education is analogous to the highest aim in mathematics, namely, to obtain not results but powers, not particular solutions, but the means by which endless solutions may be wrought. He is the most effective educator who aims less at perfecting specific acquirements than at producing that mental condition which renders acquirements easy, and leads to their useful application...

On the same ground it may be said that the most effective writer is... he who rouses in others the activities that must issue in discovery, who awakes men from their indifference to the right and the wrong, who nerves their energies to seek for the truth and live up to it at whatever cost... he clears away the film from your eyes that you may search for data to some purpose. He does not, perhaps, convince you, but he strikes you, undeceives you, animates you. You are not directly fed by his books, but you are braced as by a walk up to an alpine summit, and yet subdued to calm and reverence as by the sublime things to be seen from that summit. Such a writer is Thomas Carlyle.

It is an idle question to ask whether his books will be read a century hence: if they were all burnt as the grandest of Suttees on his funeral pile, it would be only like cutting down an oak after its acorns have sown a forest. For there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived... The extent of his influence may be best seen in the fact that ideas which were startling novelties when he first wrote them are now become common-places. And we think few men will be found to say that this influence on the whole has not been for good...

(Who didn't start the fire...)

3/5.

[Free online]

[Thinking #3, Theory #2]

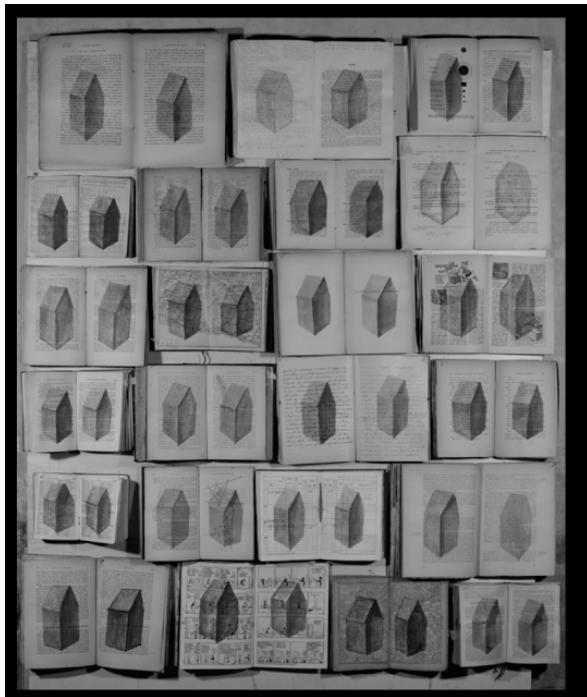
- ***The Shepherd's Crown*** (2015) by Terry Pratchett. Don't know if the flatness of this comes from its being Young Adult, or from the smoothed, modern nature of his late Discworld, or from the cortical atrophy. Little of his obliquity and spark to show; it feels like someone else's writing, and no doubt it substantially was. Trades on past power, and what power it was: his witches are pre-modern doctor, social worker, priest, undertaker, and night watch. Came to say goodbye, and I got that after 5 short chapters.

2/5.

[Library]

[Values #3]

NOVEMBER 2016



(c) Errata Corrige #4 (2013) by Ekaterina Panikanova

- ***Learning Spark*** (2011) by Holden Karau. Tool books are difficult to stomach: their contents are so much more ephemeral than other technical books. It often feels like it's not worth it: in 10 years, will it matter? etc. (This is an incredibly high bar to pose, but that's how high my opinion is of the technical pursuits.) O'Reilly soften this blow, occasionally, by enlisting really brilliant authors who bring in the eternal and the broad while pootering around their narrow furrow. (I am incredibly fond of Alan Gates for this, for instance.)

Spark is the biggest deal by far in my corner of the world and will probably affect your life in minor ways you will never pin down (see O'Neil below).

3/5.

[Theory #1, Thinking #1]

- ***Curiosity: How Science Became Interested in Everything*** (2012) by Philip Ball.
Actually a history of the early modern origins of science: the long trek via Natural Magic, Alchemy, Neoplatonism, herbalism. The context of discovery is messy. Ball doesn't but in general people make way too much of this fact.

The received view of scientific history is one-dimensional: you have the superstitious qualitative cretins at one end and the atheistic mathematised moderns at the other. Really it needs at least 5 axes before you get even a basic understanding of the great, great revolution that began to happen around the C16th. I've graphed the intellectual space in the full review.

3*/5.

[Library]

[Data #1, 2, 3]

- ***Signifying Rappers*** (1989) by David Foster Wallace and Mark Costello. The first book on hip-hop? Certainly the first High Academic one. Though, not really a book, as they frequently acknowledge: it's a "sampler". And not expert, as they constantly acknowledge: more than half of it is them pseudo-nervously hedging about being two elite white guys peering into what was then a fairly closed circle. A solid effort too - it knows and guesses and connects more than most critics today, despite the scene being far more ethnically closed, and far less obviously of artistic wealth; despite their often comically mishearing the lyrics; and despite not being able to find anything out about the people behind the music, because no-one returned their calls (until they pretended to be journalists).

Anyway this has 80pp of recognisably enervated DFW popping off the top of this allocortex, decent fuel for the fire of an admirer, or at any rate the only coal on offer (he was embarrassed by this book, but it is too stylish and enthusiastic to be embarrassing to us):

Ironies abound, of course, as ironies must when cash and art do lunch. Tearing down the prop-thin symbolic walls, Run-DMC aim to celebrate desegregation, but miss the fact that Aerosmith, those whitest of white rockers, are merely big-budget Led Zeppelin ripoffs, and that Led Zep came straight outta the jet-black Rhythm & Blues of Chicago's Chess Records. Dancing with Steve Tyler, Run-DMC forgets that Muddy Waters' sideman Willie Dixon had to sue Led Zeppelin to get proper credit for their use of his blues. "Walk This

Way" is an unwanted reunion of 80s black street music with part of its rich heritage, as that heritage has been mined and mongrelized by Show Biz. If this is desegregation, then shopping malls hold treasure...

It's a new and carnivorous kind of mimesis that makes weary old 'self-reference' actually kind of interesting, because it enlarges Self from the standard rock-subjective—a bundle of hormone-drenched emotions attached to a larynx and pelvis—to a 'big ole head,' a kind of visual street-corner, a monadic Everybrother, an angry, jaded eye on a centerless pop-culture country full of marginalized subnations that are themselves postmodern, looped, self-referential, self-obsessed, voyeuristic, passive, slack-jawed, debased, and sources of such prodigious signal-and-data bombardment that they seem to move faster than the angry eye itself can see...

I had been putting off reading this because of the title: I didn't know about Schooly D's track, so I read the verb in a gross academic voice ("in which we give rappers true signification") rather than the adjectival sense they actually meant ("rappers who signify").

Costello's bits are ok, DJ "MC" to MC "DFW". Wallace is harder than Costello - noting that MCs really are just yuppies, that Chuck D's claims to not be glorifying violence are absurd, that part of the fascination of hard rap is the snuff-spiral of trying to be nastier and nastier than previous hard rappers, which is just the commercial impulse of Alice Cooper minus musicianship. But this is also a winning early bet: that rap is poetry, that it was and would be "the decade's most important and influential pop movement":

Our opinion, then, from a distance: not only is serious rap poetry, but, in terms of the size of its audience, its potency in the Great U.S. Market, its power to spur and to authorize the artistic endeavor of a discouraged and malschooled young urban culture we've been encouraged sadly to write off, it's quite possibly the most important stuff happening in American poetry today. 'Real' (viz. academic) U.S. poetry, a world no less insular than rap, no less strange or stringent about vocal, manner, and the contexts it works off, has today become so inbred (against its professed wishes) inaccessible that it just doesn't get to share its creative products with more than a couple thousand fanatical, sandal-shod readers...

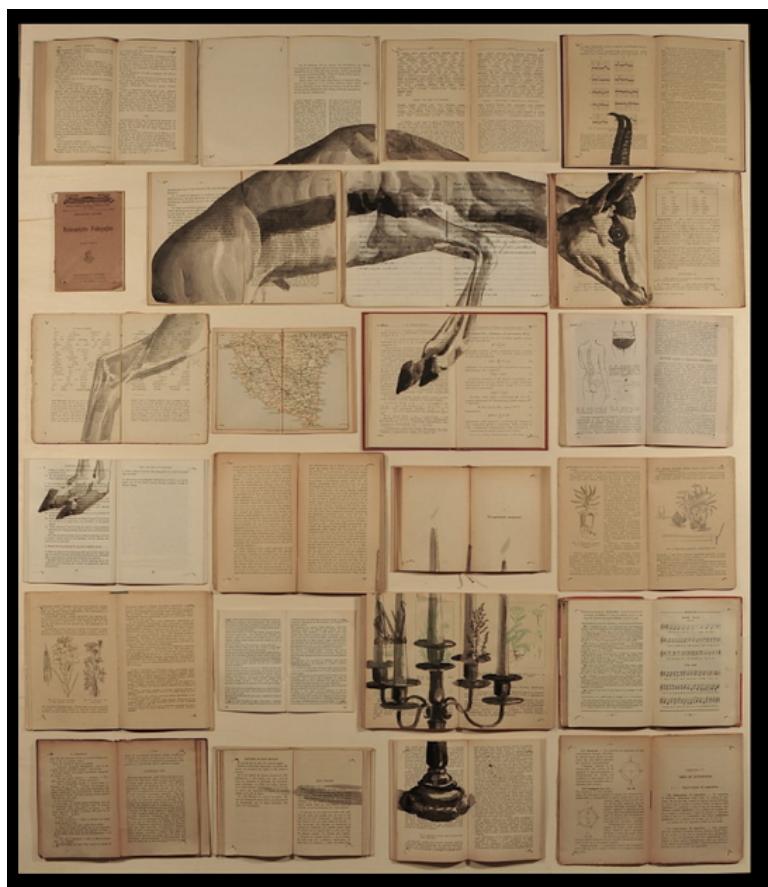
Your enjoyment will depend on you giving a crap about the sheer horror of rap's initial context, and on being able to tolerate intentionally torturous pomo prose and juxtapositions (e.g. *I Dream of Jeannie* vs race riots). I loved it and twice missed my stop on the tube reading it.

3*/5.

[Library]

[Data #1, Theory #1, Values #1, Thinking #2]

DECEMBER 2016



(c) Errata Corrige #11 (2013) by Ekaterina Panikanova

- **House of God** (1971) by Samuel Shem. Updikean satire, more delightful than funny. Its surrealism, puns (*Mrs Risenstein, an LOL in NAD* [little old lady in no obvious distress]), sexual glibness earn it a right to sentimentality in the face of human filth and pain:

We fought. She probably knew we were fighting about Dr. Sanders's long dying and about the illusion in my father's letters and about my plethora of absent role models and the blossoming idea that the gomers were not our patients but our adversaries, and most of all we were fighting over the guilt that I felt for having Molly in a dark corner of the ward standing up, this Molly, who, like me, wouldn't stop and think and feel either, because if she ruminated on what she felt about enemas and emesis basins, she'd lose faith even in her centipede and want to kill herself too. Our fight was not the violent, howling, barking fight that keeps alive vestiges of love, but that tired, distant, silent fight where the fighters are afraid to punch for fear the punch will kill. So this is it, I thought dully, four months into the internship and I've become an animal, a mossbrained moose who did not and could not and would not think and talk, and it's come like an exhausted cancerous animal to my always love, my buddy Berry, and me—yes it's come to us: Relationship On Rocks...

Shem's dialogue is pleasurable - the Flann O'Joyce variety of brainy silliness. His two eloquent Irish cops are the best people in the book:

"Top o' the morning to you, brave Sergeant Finton Gilheeney."
"Is it the Commissioner?"

"None other. The young doctor says that with the aid of an operation, with the usefulness of the scalpel being demonstrated, you will survive."

"-Dr Basch, I believe that I now have no need of the last rites. If so, could the priest depart? He scares me in the memory of how close to heaven or that hot other place I came."

"-And is there a message for the little woman, the wife?" the Commissioner asked as the priest left...

"Ah well, all the best boyo, and I'm on my way to your wife and will soothe her with my boyish good looks and TV-cop mien. Good-bye, and for the young scholar here who saved your fine red life, SHALOM and God bless."

Savage, all of it, savage.

Like any psychologically ambitious work of the mid-C20th, it has a lot of Freud in it, much of it going unchallenged. The book is also about the distress and pain of an extremely lucky and insulated and remunerated man surrounded by women who do massive amounts for him, but you mostly forget this, it is that good.

I imagine there are still pockets of people out there who still believe in the 1950s George Clooney heroism and omnicompetence of doctors. So Shem, hot-shot prof at BMS, and his book have work to do.

4/5.

[Theory #2, Values #2]

- **Seveneves** (2014) by Neal Stephenson. Amazing hard worldbuilding from a lunatic seed: 'what would happen if the moon just blew up?' You will stomach pages of physical exposition before most scenes, but none of it is superfluous. First two-thirds are psychologically convincing: you will ball your fists at the politics. Couple of railroaded plot points - e.g. it is taken for granted that a psychopathic war criminal has every right to an equal share of the genetic future. And the last third's extrapolation of 5000 years of cultural creep is less formally ambitious than e.g. *Cloud Atlas*.

First two-thirds **4*/5**, last third **3/5**.

[Library][Theory #1, Theory #2, Theory #4, Values #2]

- **Weapons of Math Destruction** (2016) by Cathy O'Neil. Original, important, expert, impassioned in the right places. I have some gripes of course; full review here.

4*/5.

[Data #2, Theory #1, Theory #3, Values #1]

- **Born to Run** (2016) by Bruce Springsteen. Fans only. Though you probably will be one if you've given him the time: he is unusual among rock auteurs, since he is populist and wholesome to the point of naivete:

*I was... a circumstantial bohemian - I didn't do any drugs or drink...
I was barely holding on to myself as it was. I couldn't imagine
introducing unknown agents into my system. I needed control and
those ever-elusive boundaries... Music was going to get me as high
as I needed to go... the counterculture stood by definition in
opposition to the conservative blue-collar experience I'd had.*

Prose is clumsy enough to be actually his work, and is eloquent by rockstar standards:

*When it rains, the moisture in the humid air blankets our town with
the smell of damp coffee grounds wafting in from the Nescafé factory
at the town's eastern edge. I don't like coffee but I like that smell. It's
comforting; it unites the town in a common sensory experience; it's
good industry, like the roaring rug mill that fills our ears, brings
work and signals our town's vitality. There is a place here—you can
hear it, smell it—where people make lives, suffer pain, enjoy small
pleasures, play baseball, die, make love, have kids, drink themselves
drunk on spring nights and do their best to hold off the demons that
seek to destroy us, our homes, our families, our town...*

He's had thirty years of psychotherapy, the poor sod. He is intellectual enough to take his feelings and their theories seriously - but not intellectual enough to be sceptical about their interminable unscientific faffing.

2/5.

[Values #3]

- ***Keeping On Keeping On*** (2016) by Alan Bennett. Diaries in the lee of becoming actually famous. I love him dearly and bolted all 700pp in a couple of days. General sense of him reaping decades of quiet acclaim: he bumps into well-wishers and heavy-hitters (Stoppard,) every week or so. One of the reasons I love him is that I had a very similar adolescence to his. And he remains a reserved sort, kind-but-grumpy:

*Being in love unhappily singled you out, I thought, it drafted you
into an aristocracy. It was more than just a badge of being gay but
rather an ordeal you were called upon to undergo if only to
transcend it and reach a sublimity denied to other mortals.*

*In the evening to the New York Public Library where I am to be
made a Library Lion... There are half a dozen of us being lionised
and we are lined up and photographed and made much of before
going upstairs to a magnificent supper, getting home thoroughly*

knackered around 11. How people lead a social life is beyond me.

I clung far too long to the notion that shyness was a virtue and not, as I came too late to see, a bore.

He still feels outside of things (for all his reminiscences of dinner with Harold Wilson or Liz Taylor perching on his knee). On winning a Tony for Best Play aged 72:

I am thrust blinking on to a stage facing a battery of lights while questions come out of the darkness, the best of which is: 'Do you think this award will kick-start your career?'

Talks so much about 50s Yorkshire. (People in general seem to think about their childhoods more than I do. (or just writers?)) I suppose he is taken to be a twee writer for this nostalgia, along with his cuddly speaking voice. But he simply isn't twee - he is the author of several of the finest nihilist soliloquys in English literature. You may know the ignorance of people by their use of this stereotype.

He is touchingly agitated by British politics, in the exact way I used to be. His protests are unprogrammatic, based simply on the meanness or indignity or cowardice of the policy at hand, whether it's a Labour or Tory hand;

I wanted a Labour government so that I could stop thinking about politics, knowing that the nation's affairs were in the hands of a party which, even if it was often foolish, was at least well-intentioned. Now we have another decade of the self-interested and the self-seeking, ready to sell off what's left of our liberal institutions and loot the rest to their own advantage. It's not a government of the nation but a government of half the nation, a true legacy of Mrs Thatcher...

I've always thought that this was a pretty fair description of that blend of backward-looking radicalism and conservative socialism which does duty for my political views. I am an old modernian... [Over the past 30 years] one has only had to stand still to become a radical.

With the fading of the old loud left, and the abject failure of the sneering theoretical sort, unpretentious justice of this sort might motivate people, even/especially opportunist Brexiters. So to the defence of public libraries, the unprecedented conviction of policemen who murder, the provision of good to all.

4*/5.

[Library]

[Data #1, Values #3, Thinking #3]

- ***On the Move*** (2015) by Oliver Sacks. Rushed: just a string of events and bad prose extracts from his adolescence. Also two long chapters exaggerating the achievements of two scientific titans vs consciousness studies (Crick and Edelman). Hadn't known his love life was so fraught - he looks like such a bull (and indeed Bennett remembers Sacks at Oxford as a brash alpha). Weightlifting chat is endearing in an intellectual. Read his real books.

3/5.

[Values #3, Theory #1]

*Acause incomer will ayeways be a clarty wird
acause this tongue A gabber wi will nivver be the real
Mackay, A sing
Acause fer aw that we're aw Jock Tamson's etcetera,
are we tho? Eh? Are we.
Acause o muntains, castles, tenements n backlans,
acause o whisky exports, acause o airports,
acause o islans, A sing.
acause of pubs whit arena daein sae weel oot o the
smokin ban, A sing.
a cause hit's grand tae sit wi a lexicon n a deeskit
mynd, A sing.
acause o the pish in the stair, A sing.
acause o ye,
A sing o a Scotland whit wadna ken working class
authenticity gin hit cam reelin aff an ile rig douned six
pints n glasst hit in the cunt.
whit hit wadna
by the way.*

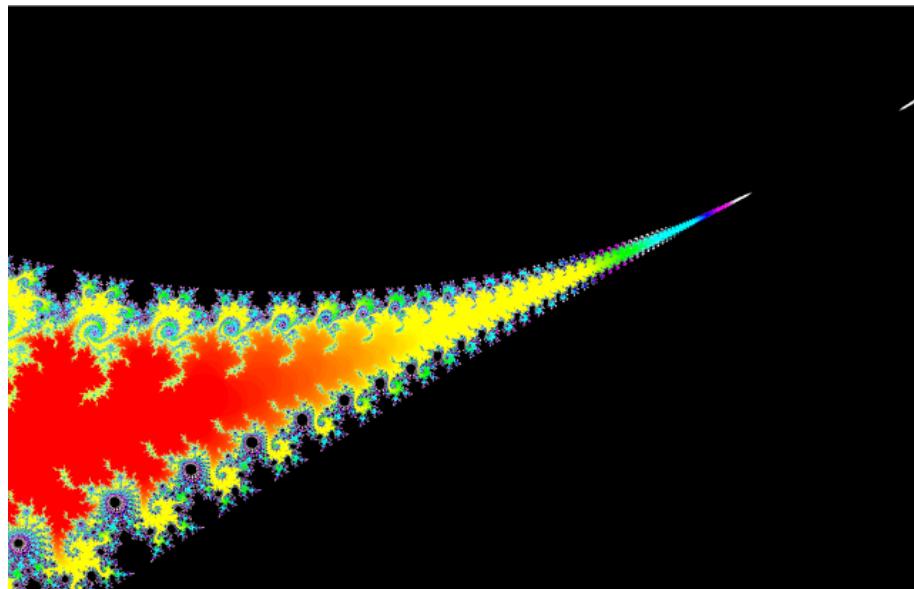
*A sing o a google Scotland
o laptop Scotland
o a Scotland saw dowf on bit-torrentit HBO
drama series n DLC packs fer paistapocalyptic RPGs
that hit wadna ken
hits gowk fae its gadjie,
fae whas lips n fingers amazebawz cams
mair freely as bangin...*

*A sing o a Scotland bidin in real dreid o wan day findin
oot juist hou parochial aw hits cultural references mey
be,
n cin only cope wi the intertextuality o the Scots
Renaissance wi whappin annotatit editions n
weens hits the same wi awbdy else.*

*I sing o a Scotland whit'll chant hits hairt oot
dounstairs o the Royal Oak, whit'll pouk hits timmer
clarsach hairtstrangs, whit like glamour will sing hits
hairt intae existence, whit haps sang aroon hits bluidy
nieve hairt,
whit sings.*

- Harry Giles

Antifragile (2012) by Nassim Taleb



(c) 'Accidental Fish', 2013

"Nothing convinces us of our capacity to make choices — nothing sustains our illusion of freedom — more than our ability to regularise our behaviour. nothing is more capable of destroying our interest and our pleasure in what we do.

If it is the predictable that stupifies us and the unpredictable that terrorises us, what should we do? If we are always caught between risk and resignation, between confidence and catastrophe, how can we decide what to do next?"

— Adam Phillips

*My problem is what my mother kept telling me:
I'm too messianic in my views.*

— Taleb

The most ambitious and messy book in his idiosyncratic four-volume work of evolutionary epistemology, the '*Incerto*'. (It is *Fooled By Randomness*, *Black Swan*, *Bed of Procrustes*, and *yonder*.) The former three books are largely critical, hacking away at theory-blindness, model error, and the many kinds of people he sees as possessing unearned status (economists,

journalists, consultants, business-book writers): this is the upswing, a chaotic attempt to give general positive advice in a world that dooms general positive advice.

Every other page has something worth hearing, for its iconoclasm, or a Latin gobbet, or catty anecdote, if not something globally and evidently true. I think he is right about 30% of the time, which is among the highest credences I have for anyone. I only think I am 35% right, for instance.* But a core point of his system is that his approach should work even given our huge and partially intractable ignorance.

The core point, repeated a hundred times for various domains:

*In real life, many systems deteriorate without an irregular supply of stressors (non-fatal negative events), and actually benefit from them by constructively overreacting. By robbing such 'antifragile' systems of stressors, modern approaches to managing them do damage in the guise of helping out.***

This observation leads to his grand theory of everything: every system is either *fragile* (damaged by volatility), *robust* (resistant to damage from volatility), or *antifragile*. This isn't a trivial distinction, because each has formal properties that allow us to change arrangements to, firstly, prevent explosions, and then to gain from chance volatility.

Biology is definitely one of these antifragile systems***; his case that, absent gross financialisation, the global economy would be one is convincing too; and the idea's at least plausible when applied to the cultivation of virtue or existential strength in a single person. The danger with this - an indissoluble danger because there can be no general strategy to avoid it - is that in welcoming constructive stress we'll miss the point at which the welcomed dose turns destructive (where fasting starts to atrophy, where training becomes masochism, where critique becomes pogrom, where sink-or-swim encouragement turns abuse).

* This claim is remarkable for both its extreme vagueness and apparent arrogance. Here is a post to handle the former fact. And the latter:

It might strike you as beyond arrogant to assume that you *just so happen* to be the most reliable inference device in the world, but that doesn't (have to) follow from my claim above, which results from the trivial thought "I

believe my own beliefs most”, instead.

(Consider the converse: if I came to view anyone as more reliable than me, the rational thing to do would be to incorporate their truer views (and, better, their methods) until I again thought of myself as at least their equal. So, either one believes the superficially arrogant position “I believe my beliefs most” – or else one must believe that one is incapable of adapting enough to superior methods when faced with them, or else one must believe that one cannot know which methods are best. So the above assumption is more about having a high opinion of rational adjustment than impossible egotism, I think.

Good news! We can now calibrate ourselves, at least for the most sensational and available predictions using this cool thing.[^]

Finally!: The fully-unpacked, properly defensible assumption might be something more like: “I am the agent that I know to be most transparently reliable or unreliable; I assume I’m adjusting properly to better methods; as such I have at least equal confidence in my own belief set, compared to the best known alternative agent’s.”)

[^] You might wonder if this argument suggests that I should have 100% confidence in my beliefs. No; even if I was the best inferrer, I would suffer uncertainty because of the opacity of my errors: that is, I know I’m often not right but don’t know exactly whereabouts I’m not right. Also from the unsystematic internal PredictionBook every non-psychopath has (“*wisdom is knowing you’ll be an idiot in the future*”). And another source of uncertainty is down to the unknowable (like what stocks will crash next week).

I do worry that, whatever my particular self-credence estimate is, the whole approach is subtly wrong somewhere – since “40%” gives the impression that I think of myself as a worse guide to the world than dumb chance^{^^} – but I think it works. Particularly if much of the missing 60% is made of safe scepticism rather than errors.

^{^^} For binary event spaces – but, really, how many of those are there in real life?

** He credits the formal basis of all this to Jensen's inequality, in a chapter which might be the clearest expression of the idea there is.

*** (In particular species-level evolution, but also organism-level health.)

Some pigeonholes you might think to put all this in:

- *Conservative?* Yes; but a good-hearted Burkean (“*Antifragility implies that the old is superior to the new... What survives must be good at serving some purpose that time can see but our eyes and logical faculties can't capture...*”). Most people are conservative over *some* things (e.g. the natural world; we just happen to call that conservationism instead). Also approves of any high technology that removes anything he views as a disease of civilisation, like these things were supposed to be. So, in general, conservative only in the sense that existential risk people are.*
- *Economic conservatism.* Only sort of; he's a trader, and would have speculation free to flow *provided that deposit banks were nationalised first*, and prioritises deficit reduction in a way we associate with conservatives but which e.g. Sweden pulled off without any lasting social justice sting. More formally he is against centralisation on both moral and technical grounds; that is *likely* a principle with some conservative effects, justified, in theory, by its keeping us alive. (Life-critical politics.)
- *Laissez faire?* No: he recommends radical change to e.g. science funding, but no decrease. Big fan of Switzerland's government, read into that what you will. He sees “optionality”, an originally financial concept, as the solution to fragility risks and the key to success in every domain there is. This isn't at all as economic as it sounds; the sacred and the humane somehow fit perfectly into his core rationalist agenda, persistence through change.
- *Social conservatism?* No sign; no discussion of discrimination. Some people think such abstention is oppressive, but they are probably wrong.
- *Social Darwinist?* Nah.

- *Bioconservative*? Absolutely; he describes himself as the ‘diametric’ opposite of Ray Kurzweil, and he’s in full uproar over the global risk posed by synthetic biology (and recently fleshed out this horror in highly rigorous terms).
- *Anti-intellectual*? Not at all! Only anti-academia, and they still do not represent the whole of quality intellectual life. Hates irresponsible ‘canned methods of inference’ too (statistical significance, etc).
- *Lacrimist*? (That is, does he glorify suffering?) Not quite. He certainly views comfort as vitiating. His opposition to transhumanism is too quick and doesn’t take the moral challenge of a world of pained beings seriously enough, for me.
- *Macho*? Hm. Well, nature *has* made certain challenging actions optimal. Amusing proto-paleo attitude, too:

I, for my part, resist eating fruits not found in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean (I use “I” here in order to show that I am not narrowly generalizing to the rest of humanity). I avoid any fruit that does not have an ancient Greek or Hebrew name, such as mangoes, papayas, even oranges. Oranges seem to be the postmedieval equivalent of candy; they did not exist in the ancient Mediterranean.

* His work fits the x-risk paradigm very well, but he developed his edifice in complete isolation from them, and has an uncompromising scepticism about expected value that might not make cross-overs all that fruitful.

How original is the core point, really?

Well, who cares? His claim is that he had to invent the word 'antifragile', not the idea. He says, idiosyncratically, that Seneca and Nietzsche had the nub of the idea, and Jensen the formal essence; Darwin certainly did too. "Resilience engineering" and in computing, 'defensive programming' (b. 1998) and 'self-healing systems' (b. 2001) are at least on the same track, though not getting beyond a lively sort of robustness. But I doubt that most systems can become antifragile - e.g. it's hard to imagine an antifragile jet engine (one that harvests bird strikes for fuel, or soot cleaning)? So maybe it's only

the grand generalisation to all design that's new.

Gripes: His footnotes are collected by theme rather than linked to his claims directly, which makes it so difficult to follow up his sources that his credibility suffers. He namedrops, which is not the same as showing his working. I would really like to see his backing for his cool claims (about e.g. an irregular sleep pattern as a good thing, or things like ‘I suspect that thermal comfort ages people’), but it’s hidden away and often one-study. (Again: *apparently* one-study, since his working is not easily on show.)

He has a surprisingly high opinion of Steve Jobs – who I view as a grand example of an empty suit: there are 9 references to Jobs’ hokey shark-wisdom, (where Gigerenzer and Mandelbrot get 8, Jensen gets 7, Marx 7). Does Jobs really count as a ‘practitioner’ with ‘skin in the game’? Eh.

His homebrew jargon starts to drag – some sentences are wholly composed of his neologisms plus a barrel of articles and prepositions. (I used the glossary early and often.) Repetitive: tells what he’ll tell you, tells you he’s told you. Some passages really suffer from his wholesale hostility to copy-editing; there are some flatly bad sentences here. And he namedrops a lot, more than fair attribution of ideas – there are several passages that are just lists of people he likes (e.g. p.257-8).

I don't see that it's worthwhile to criticise his arrogant style; it's what animates his points, and he never uses it on weak targets.

Lastly, he sometimes makes of a system’s persistence the highest good. (Where its persistence is to be contrasted with mere stability.) This is in tension with his wonderful emphasis on artistic and quasi-sacred values elsewhere in the book.

But it talks about everything, is historically wide-eyed, relentlessly rational, and often funny. And the method-worldview-style it suggests might stop life crushing us utterly.

4*/5.

Rip it Up and Start Again: Post-punk 1978-1984 (2006)
by Simon Reynolds



An exhaustive essay on art and/versus pop, politics and/versus aesthetics, intellect and/versus passion, and on how seriously music should, in general, be taken. He reads post-punk as far wider than the sombre anti-rock art-school thing people usually take it to be – so he includes Human League and ABC as post-punks with emphasis on the post:

To varying degrees, all these groups grasped the importance of image, its power to seduce and motivate. And they all coated their music in a patina of commercial gloss, some of them pursuing a strategy of entryism, while others simply revelled in sonic luxury for the sheer glam thrill of it... it's simply inaccurate to portray New Pop, as some histories of the period have, as a 'like punk never happened' scenario. Almost all of the groups had some connection to punk...

New Pop was about making the best of the inevitable – synths and drum machines, video, the return of glamour. Colour, dance, fun and style were sanctioned as both strategically necessary (the terms of entry into pop) and pleasurable (now acceptable, with the rejection of post-punk's guilt-racked puritanism).

His scope is total: everything's here (except for oi, hardcore, Ramonescore – i.e. the people who failed to make it past punk). Reynolds divides the genre in three broad camps:

1. modernists (PiL, Cab Vol, No Wave, industrial, SST prog-punk),
2. post-pop (New Pop, electro, mutant disco, synth)
3. retro-eclectics (two-tone, Goth, neo-mods).

He gives chapters to the Other Places of 1C20th popular music: whether Akron (Devo, Pere Ubu), Leeds (Gang of Four, Mekons), Sheffield (Cabaret Voltaire, Human League), Edinburgh (Fire Engines, Josef K, Associates). There is a covert critique of punk (that is, the messianic punks) throughout the book:

Elsewhere, The Heartbreakers' stodge of refried Chuck Berry was barely more advanced than British pub rock — Dr Feelgood on an IV drip of smack rather than lager...

While the committed activists spouted the textbook party line, a more diffuse left-wing academic culture existed based on a sort of ideological pick 'n' mix — a trendy-lefty autodidactism fuelled by second-hand paperbacks and beginner's guides to Gramsci, Lukacs, and Althusser , garnished with Situationism...

Blending often-incompatible systems of thought, the resulting hodge-podge lacked rigour from the stern standpoint of academics and ideologues alike. But in rock music, a little rigour is rather bracing and galvanising. In the grand tradition of British art-rock, theory helped them achieve the sort of conceptual breakthroughs that more organically evolving groups never reach.

Instead, his favourites are the gorgeous misfits-among-misfits, who managed to be neither modernist nor entryist nor shill: Talking Heads, Meat Puppets, Associates, Japan. Crucially, he is charitable to all the tributaries: chart-hungry post-pop, politically-rabid modernism and the interminable ugliness of Throbbing Gristle, Whitehouse and No Wave: this makes Rip It Up real history rather than hagiography, and so much more than I or anyone has managed.

He has more critical acumen than any of the mooks in the brainy bands; more love than the fey melodists. I have lived in the post-punk woods – too jaded and too hopeful to be

a punk – for getting on a decade, and I thought myself a connoisseur: until now I was not.

4*/5.



Breaking Smart, 'Season' 1 (2015) by Venkatesh Rao.

A grandiose and low-res narrative covering all of history from the perspective of technology (or, rather, the perspective of the tech industry (or, rather, of the *solutionists*)) in 30,000 words. Rao is one of the big in-house theorists for Silicon Valley*, and this is reflected in his contagious enthusiasm for just how much is becoming possible so quickly, the degree to which this time actually is different ("Software is eating the world"). Second half of this season attempts to generalise software engineering ideas - Agile, forking, sprints and all that - to all human endeavour (...)

As a simple example, a 14-year-old teenager today (too young to show up in labor statistics) can learn programming, contribute significantly to open-source projects, and become a talented professional-grade programmer before age 18. This is breaking smart: an economic actor using early mastery of emerging technological leverage — in this case a young individual using software leverage — to wield disproportionate influence on the emerging future.

Only a tiny fraction of this enormously valuable activity — the cost of a laptop and an Internet connection — would show up in standard economic metrics. Based on visible economic impact alone, the effects of such activity might even show up as a negative, in the form of technology-driven deflation. But the hidden economic significance of such an invisible story is at least comparable to that of an 18-year-old paying \$100,000 over four years to acquire a traditional college degree. In the most dramatic cases, it can be as high as the value of an entire industry. The music industry is an example: a product created by a teenager, Shawn Fanning's Napster, triggered a cascade of innovation whose primary visible impact has been the vertiginous decline of big record labels, but whose hidden impact includes an explosion in independent music production and rapid growth in the live-music sector.

Yeah, I hate the title phrase too. People got cross at him being pretentious about the format (long-form blog posts released in huge chunks, to binge on like a boxset) but I like it. Very exciting for techies, and readable for nontechies. just unreliable.

4/5.

* See also Floridi, a deep but similarly narrative thinker. Compare the two to Freud and Marx: wonderfully original but mostly lacking justification.

To Save Everything, Click Here (2013) by Evgeny Morozov

Sharp, original and broad mishmash: an intellectual history of information technology, IP law, political economy, as well as an ok bit of polemical sociology and a theory of Design. His targets are the '*solutionists*', those technocrat techies who derive from the half of the Enlightenment which became positivism. (It is roughly: the will to perfect things and people, plus theorism, plus economism, plus the sheer power and scope of modern software.) Morozov is, bluntly, afraid for us all *because* software is eating the world:

Imperfection, ambiguity, opacity, disorder and the opportunity to err, to sin: all of these are constitutive of human freedom, and any concentrated attempt to root them out will root out that freedom as well... we risk finding ourselves with a politics devoid of everything that makes politics desirable, with humans who have lost their basic capacity for moral reasoning, with lackluster cultural institutions that don't take risks and, most terrifyingly, with a perfectly controlled social environment that would make dissent not just impossible but possibly even unthinkable...

(The book is only rarely as alarmist as this.) He gives a helpful survey of the present-day gurus and scholars who are involved in the uncritical adulation or demonising of the internet and its associated ideology (hyper-efficiency for everything, transparency for everything, the benevolence of emergent social processes like markets, no need to pay artists or other intellect-workers). His first great distinction is between a *solution* to a problem and a *response*; the former is objective, final, uncontroversial (i.e. maths at its best) while a response is the partial, negotiated, and rarely decisive. The novelty, promise, and danger of the solutionists is that they proffer solutions to more and more of the world, particularly in politics.

Morozov is not the opposite of Rao, because Rao is more subtle than people give him credit for, and no subtle thinker ever has a single opposite. But their values and policy recommendations are totally opposed.

His own ideological perch is really interesting: he's constantly emphasising *practice* over theory, admiring Oakeshott and Illich while emphasising that everyone of whatever politics should be worried about the hegemonic techies. It occurs to me that the word 'practice' is a way of smuggling in status quo bias without tripping people's political alarms: the conservative word for 'practice' is 'tradition'; the left word for it is 'culture'. All three concepts impede change, whether through fear and status quo bias or relativism. Morozov's bipartisan curmudgeonliness is charming, but this caution and cynicism echo throughout, in his worries about e.g. the

infantilising effect of technical ease, speed, gamification. I'm no longer the kind of person who dismisses someone based only on political or existential differences, but I do distrust people who think that the world is fine as it is (rather than just incredibly better than the other points in history), or that states of affairs are justified by their longevity rather than their being good for people. Practices need justification; justification is the practice of reason; reason very often implies efficiency. He's not anti-rationalist, but the products he attacks stem from that good tree.

At one point he gets very excited over the idea of people giving each other ratings online and thereby creating new dystopian social control mechanisms; this bold conjecture has recently been confirmed by the imminent launch of Peeple. I was going to write something about how MeowMeowBeans paranoia is unnecessary - for we already endure dystopian ranking algorithms: your salary and your number of followers are already wildly globally dominant rank orders - but it certainly speaks well of his mental model that he saw this coming. Only an outbreak of common sense (leading to Peeple's abject failure) will prevent solutionist horrors.

Many of his points apply to two of my tribes, the rationalists and the effective altruists. (Who seek to theorise and thereby improve on our native knowledge-seeking and moral reasoning, respectively.) But I don't think his critique does much against them: efficiency is humane and commonsensical in a world with scarcity and miscoordination as deep as ours; inefficiency in science and medicine bankrupts and kills people; inefficiency in charity and aid prevents many, many lives being saved or transformed. The absurd examples Morozov rightly holds up (the BinCam, the publicising of weight gain) *may be* just misapplications of the principle. We are a *long* way from the point where politics, charity, academia, or even science are over-rationalised and losing their other virtues because of excess efficiency.

Returning to his beautiful quotation, the first above: but I do not deserve the freedom to believe harmful falsehoods, nor the freedom to hide my errors behind ambiguity; nor the freedom to throw away resources which others need. And I don't want the freedom to waste my life. Technology is the only untried way of responding to our grave Darwinian inheritance of intolerance, selfishness, and irrationality. But Morozov makes his case well about the specific case of technologised politics.

4*/5.

Market Forces (2004) by Richard Morgan



So totally a book of its time: of cinematic *Adbusters*-ish rage and paranoia. By 2086, military aid has been fully privatised, making a free market out of unilateral political force:

All over the world, men and women still find causes worth killing and dying for. And who are we to argue with them? Have we lived in their circumstances? Have we felt what they feel? No. It is not our place to say if they are right or wrong. At Shorn Conflict Investments, we are concerned with only two things. Will they win? And will it pay?

Morgan's ultra-capitalism is internally coherent, but weighed down by Chomskyan exaggeration and a clumsy *Mad Max* road-rage system in which people drive FAST and MEAN to get corporate promotion. (Oh shit, metaphor.) Like many a bright-eyed anti-globaliser, Morgan tends to overdo it; at one point, a senior partner at Shorn erupts into a caricature of an inhuman plutocrat. At best, this is Morgan's homage to the stupendous “corporate cosmology” rant in *Network*. I've numbered the rant because it is such a dense cluster of Morgan's (and the anti-globalisers') muddled good intentions:

Do you really think we can 0) afford to have the developing world develop? You think we could have survived the rise of a modern, articulated Chinese superpower twenty years ago? You think we could manage an Africa full of countries run by intelligent, a) uncorrupt democrats? Or a Latin America run by men like Barranco? Just imagine it for a moment. Whole populations getting 1) educated, and 2) healthy, and 3) secure, and 4) aspirational. 5) Women's rights, for god's sake! We can't afford these things to happen, Chris. Who's going to 6) soak up our subsidised food surplus for us? 7)

Who's going to make our shoes and shirts? 8) Who's going to supply us with cheap labour and cheap raw materials? 9) Who's going to buy our arms?"

0) A totally false dichotomy: uncoerced trade is never zero-sum! Also, everyone has an economic interest in the economic development of the world; roughly, the richer my neighbours are, the more they can buy from me, the richer am I.

a) Corruption is terrible for business; it subsumes about one dollar in twenty of the entire world's output. Individually beneficial acts of bribery collectively lead to a ludicrously bad (and anti-capital!) state;

1) Education is good for economies, and thus good for the West (by point 0);

2) healthy workers are very good for economies;

3) war disrupts consumer spending more than anything else (as opposed to the economics of inflicting war, admittedly, but that isn't the plutocrat's point);

4) (a certain limited form of) aspiration is the very heart of a consumer economy;

5) there were huge economic gains from feminism;

6) this is mildly true, but governmental horrors like the CAP give Morgan's rage some urgency;

7) By 2086? Robots; 8) By 2086? Robots; 9) This one is true and horrible.

This economic naivete is balanced by the characteristic virtues of Morgan's writing: pace, cool uncliched weapons, his pro-social rage (here, wifebeaters and Nazis suffer retributive atrocities). In a rarity for SF, Morgan underestimates the rate of tech growth (by his 2086): for instance, their drones are much larger and more limited in application than ours are already. (The book is also a very good portrait of ordinary marital pain.)

One of his warders offered to let him have some books, but when the promised haul arrived, it consisted of a bare half-dozen battered paperbacks by authors Chris had never heard of. He picked one at random, a luridly violent far-future crime novel about a detective who could seemingly exchange bodies at will, but the subject matter was alien to him and his attention drifted: it all seemed very far-fetched.

A few nice meanings in there: Morgan's apparent self-deprecation is actually bragging about his still being in print in a hundred years; Kovacs is just this book's Faulkner character plus genetic mods; thus Faulkner finding the book "alien" is actually a serious comment on his lack of basic self-consciousness, and explains why the loss of Carla is so fatal to his character (can't introspect enough to prevent his fall). Crass and flashy, but politically and psychologically ambitious. I have read everything Morgan has written and will return.

3*/5.

Behind the Wall (1987) by Colin Thubron



*Arhat statues surfing at Qiongzhu Temple,
(c) Li Guangxiu (c.1890)*

A stunning travel book in the best aristocratic tradition of wandering about talking to people and expecting monasteries to put you up unannounced. But it's as much moral as geographic or historical. China had only just opened up to foreigners, again; the Cultural Revolution, just 15 years past, looms large. A lost generation. In fact the book is obsessed with the difficult question, "How could they do that to themselves?", a focus which makes it excellent, informal long-form journalism as much as gentleman's what-ho travel narrative.

The man went on: 'We found a porter who had been reading novels with a love interest. I don't mean porn. Just a personal story. This was decadent. We beat him unconscious, and burnt the books. Then he died.'

I looked at him in astonishment, mesmerised, for some reason, by his immaculately pressed trousers. Once the armour of social constraint had been stripped from him, the person inside had been exposed as a baby: conscienceless. Was that China, I wondered, or just him? In any case, where was that feeling of pity which Mencius said was common to all men?

The question isn't as simply answered as it is for Hitler's Germany (answer: "Because the merest dissent by any German meant death") nor even as it is for Stalinist Russia (since the unbelievable violence of the Holodomor and gulags was meted out by a

comparatively small number of people). Millions of educated Red Guards brutalised millions of untrendy people without much central control at all (indeed, they often revolted against and scared the shit out of the PLA and the apparatchiks).

Thubron's important points include: that the Party cadres are nothing more than the latest garb of the long, long line of elite mandarins. So the poor Laobaixing got all the downside of an absolutist bureaucracy *plus* all the incompetence and terror caused by people who think that violent unending revolution is desirable. Another large theme is the appalling state of women: The patriarchy there was without even the paltry sweetener of chivalry - married off at 14 if not murdered as infants; old women sitting in the aisles of busses while young men lounge, etc, etc. Many of the people he meets (mostly lower-middle-class) were (are?) unbelievably obsessed with class, even after forty years of 'communist' rule; the brief, cursory glorification of the nongmin bounced back as soon as the big sticks went away. He calculates the cost of things - TVs, train tickets, hotel whiskies - in that most decent of measures, fractions of an average worker's monthly wage.

There is, already in 1987, an ambitious, irreverent, apolitical youth which any graduate of a Western university will now recognise readily.** The modern Modern China - Deng's China - is visible here, just. Thubron watches the future radiating out from the city:

Under the enormous vault of the station hall there resounds the tramp of a newly mobilised peasantry. I have seen them before all over the city: families arrived to buy or trade, sleeping under bridges or in shop porches with cap over their eyes. Now they step on to the escalators as gingerly as Western eight-year-olds, laden with rope-trussed boxes, newly bought televisions, chickens in hampers, radios, bags spilling out fruit and biscuits - bearing El Dorado back to the village. They overflow the waiting-rooms and camp against every wall behind their baggage palisades, snoring open-mouthed through the din with the detachment of Brueghel swineherds, their children in their arms.

reportage he endorses: thus, a couple of outlandish claims are possibly deadpan jokes (e.g. only '100' cars on mainland China in 1987?? Human flesh on sale in Canton?)

Unsurprisingly, the book received a dab of cursory post-colonial critique.* This is unsurprising because he is interested in *testing* stereotypes out - in particular, finding out if innate cruelty enabled the Cultural Revolution; it is thus not unfair to imagine the book as a Eurocentric hatchet job. But this dismissive cynicism is only possible *before* you've heard his frank encounters with a hundred vivid, intelligent, and mournful locals, seen his solid grasp of the history of the dynasties and of 'pedantic and kindly' Confucianism. (Which is the best description of it I've ever seen.) Those interviews *are* novelistic - impossibly sincere, compressed, tragic, poetic - and far beyond anything I could elicit as a foreigner, in my summer there. But you believe him even so.

Anyway he doesn't pretend to have answered his burning question:

'This sort of thing isn't peculiar to my country,' the priest said: he might have been thought-reading. 'Look at Germany, Russia. Of course, those countries are not old civilisations like ours, but still...'

Of course. I was wading into an ocean. He was listening patiently, but I could not assemble any coherent thoughts. I wanted to explain that it was not the presence of cruelty which surprised me, but some imbalance between obedience and mercy, the collapse of domestic compassion in the face of official demand, the refinements of tortures practiced against teachers and friends, the denunciation of parents - but I stumbled into inarticulacy. I was juggling only with my own values, not with theirs. I knew nothing.

I oughtn't skimp on the book's adventure-story side just because it happens to be a beautiful and humane psychological portrait; the prose is persistently gorgeous, the sights are dryly and comprehensively evoked, and Thubron presents himself as a very fine comic character to boot. My favourite China book.

* Anti-Eurocentric writing used to minimise totalitarian genocide can be found in the critical discussion of Thubron here, the snob passage around the dismaying line: "*In Thubron's mind*, the Cultural Revolution reached the epitome of atrocities in terms of intensity and scope..." (emphasis mine). That author also takes the prize for most dishonest truncation of the week, since Thubron's monologue goes on to display cultural sensitivity in the face of cultural horror (see "This sort of thing", above).

** There must be a better word for 'occidentaphile' than that itself. (We used to call it simply 'being civilised' - but let's be civilised about it.)

The Theory that Would Not Die: How Bayes' Rule (...)



(c) *Red Rationality* (1987) by Wang Guangyi

..... (2012) by Sharon McGayne. A slightly forced oral history of the least romanticised scientists: Bayesian statisticians. She makes up for the long-missing romanticism single-handed! The two-hundred year eclipse of the Bayesian method was much longer than that suffered by even the irrationally-maligned continental drift theory (50 years). And this neglect and opprobrium was suffered by a paradigm now accepted everywhere as powerful and useful in literally all kinds of research.

She wins us over, particularly with her chapter on the secretive, truculent, omnicompetent genius John Tukey, who used Bayesian methods for elections 40 years before *Fivethirtyeight*, with comparable success. But her prose is borderline, with lots of clear but dim-bulb sentences. She has one infuriating mannerism: she constantly refers to Bayes' rule, Bayesian logical foundations after Bayes, Bayesian inference, *and* personalist Bayesian epistemology by the single terrible metonym "Bayes":

At its heart, Bayes runs counter to the deeply held conviction that science requires total objectivity and precision. Bayes is a measure of belief.

even many nonstatisticians regarded Swinburne's lack of care and measurement as a black mark against Bayes itself.

Bayes, on the other hand, seemed to produce results that corresponded more closely to sociologists' intuitions.

Wagner took along the youngest and greenest of his three-man staff, Henry Richardson, who had earned a PhD in probability theory all of seven months earlier. He would be Bayes' point man at Palomares.

I suppose she did this to elide away jargon, but it both equivocates between very different entities, hides the complexity of the 'Bayesian' marquee, makes it seem like the frequentists were attacking a logically sound theorem, and produces a whole list of bizarre images, where we see the reclusive Reverend doing all these things: cracking Enigma and Tunny, finding H-Bombs lost at sea, calculating appropriate worker's comp amounts in the absence of reliable data, attributing *The Federalist Papers* to Hamilton, and blocking 99.9% of the spam email from reaching you (yes, you). It is also even *more* unfair to Laplace than usual. (It was he who developed Bayesianism into the powerful applied framework it is, into more than a single gambler's theorem. Ok, so "Laplace-Coxism" is admittedly even less admissible as a term to which the wise and honest may repair.) But grammatical twitching aside this was a fun introduction to an important thing.

She focusses on the soft, social side (and on applications vaguely summarised). There was a huge amount of factional bitching between these serious and cloistered men:

Attending his first Bayesian conference in 1976, Jim Berger was shocked to see half the room yelling at the other half. Everyone seemed to be good friends, but their priors were split between the personally subjective, like Savage's, and the objective, like Jeffrey's - with no definitive experiment to decide the issue.

In a frustrated circle of blame, Persi Diaconis was shocked and angry when John Pratt used frequentist methods to analyze his wife's movie theater attendance data, because it was too much for the era's computers to handle. But one of the low moments of Diaconis' life occurred in a Berkeley coffee shop, where he was correcting proofs of an article of his and where Lindley blamed him for using frequency methods. "And you're our leading Bayesian", Lindley complained. Lindley, in turn, upset Mosteller by passing up a chance to conduct a big project using Bayes instead of frequency...

Asked how to encourage Bayesian theory, Lindley answered tartly, "Attend funerals".

This human focus means she gives no treatment of Cox's theorem, certainly the most remarkable result in formal epistemology (and probability theory?), and one of the main things which rationally warrants the partisanship and excitement she displays for Bayesian thought throughout. ("Justified fundamentalism", as one great commentator puts it!) It proves that any attempt to use numbers to model belief must be Bayesian or logically equivalent to it. With other results, it raises Bayesianism to the only viable quantitative theory of rationality and of right learning, a behemoth of which Aristotelian logic is a mere special case. No doubt I'm unusual in finding this the most exciting bit.

She's to be applauded for digging out novel examples of Bayesian analysis which were classified or which avoided using the word: early actuarial work, Tukey's US election model, the pre-Three-Mile-Island federal report of reactor safety, and the entire field of operational research. But she is so concerned with emphasising the (genuine) long oppression of the paradigm that she under-emphasises the good reasons to resist Bayesian methods before 1980: they were simply computationally intractable before MCMC. (Which makes the sheer effort put in to shortcuts and approximation methods by ingenious people quite tragic; they just aren't needed anymore, thirty years later.) To her credit, she does mention the parallel dogmatism of the 60s Bayesians and the presumptive overenthusiasm of some people in the last 10 years.

(The great contemporary frequentist, Deborah Mayo, is able to subtitle her blog "Frequentists in Exile" without being absurd - even though Stats 101 and "Methods for [Social Science]" courses are still everywhere dominated by canned Fisherian tests and frames. She means exile from the philosophy of statistics and probability.)

Insofar as you want to understand the large trends of the present and coming age, you need to know its economics; insofar as you must understand the new economics, you must understand AI; insofar as you must understand AI, you must understand machine learning and decision theory; insofar as you must understand machine learning, you must understand both frequentism and Bayesianism. Insofar as you do not yet have the mathematics to understand Bayesianism, nor the excitement of the promise of a final, real synthesis of objective with subjective, you must read this gentle prose work. Once you are excited by its vague promises, you can find progressively more rigorous people and will have actually have reason to stomach the formalism.

3/5, 4*/5 for those just beginning the march.

What Matters Most is How Well You Walk Through the Fire (1999)

by Charles Bukowski

*all theories
like cliches
shot to hell,
all these small faces
looking up
beautiful and believing;
I wish to weep
but sorrow is
stupid.
I wish to believe but belief is a
graveyard.
we have narrowed it down to
the butcherknife and the
mockingbird
wish us
luck.*

If you can't sleep and it's 2am and tomorrow's going to be a pain in the arse and you're alone in the house, well, there is no better book. Unbeatable at what it does, which is to slide through the mind with zero cognitive friction, depositing the emotional silt and cheap, warm style of a previously insane and helpfully hopeless man in you – whatever you want that for. More than any other poet, he just literally talks to you. You can roll your eyes at his gaucheness and despise his chauvinism and feel nothing all you like: that's fine. It doesn't matter. It's not the point.

So it's barely art, but he knows it. Pity any academic working on CB: these poems don't invite analysis; they are worn on their own surface. They mean just what they first mean. Many of them are just about writing poems, but I cannot resent their hollowness, since emptiness is his brush. Bukowski's poems are just a man in a room. Odd that this is enough to make people read them voluntarily, religiously, unlike almost all contemporary poetry with their bigger brains and better politics and more eventful stories and uplifting messages. Its main virtue is complete honesty.

*...so much has gone by for most of us,
even the young, especially the young
for they have lost the beginning and have
the rest of the way to go;
but isn't it strange, all i can think of now are*

*cucumbers, oranges, junk yards, the
old Lincoln Heights jail and
the lost loves that went so hard
and almost brought us to the edge,
the faces now without features,
the love beds forgotten.
the mind is kind: it retains the
important things:
cucumbers
oranges
junk yards
jails.*

*...there used to be over 100 of us in that big room
in that jail
i was in there many / times.
you slept on the floor
men stepped on your face on the way to piss.
always a shortage of cigarettes.
names called out during the night
(the few lucky ones who were bailed out)
never you.*

*...when love came to us twice
and lied to us twice
we decided to never love again
that was fair
fair to us
and fair to love itself.
we ask for no mercy or no
miracles;
we are strong enough to live
and to die and to
kill flies,
attend the boxing matches, go to the racetrack,
live on luck and skill,
get alone, get alone often,
and if you can't sleep alone
be careful of the words you speak in your sleep;
and
ask for no mercy
no miracles;
and don't forget:
time is meant to be wasted,
love fails
and death is useless*

Everything that people mock Leonard Cohen for is much more true of Bukowski (misery, drawling, self-obsession, archness, chauvinism, treating the whole world as your confessional); he is just more direct and macho about it; that fact, and the very different crowd surrounding his medium is enough to earn him contempt rather than mockery. (And contempt is a kind of involuntary respect.) Backwards analogy: Bukowski is Tom Waits minus gospel, minus FX pedals, minus Brecht and Weill, minus one steady Kathleen peer. And minus metre of course. A grumpy adolescent old man; a sensitising misanthrope; a beautiful lech.

He has only two modes: midnight countercultural raving and laconic woke-at-noon observation. Neither would work without his lecherousness and/or meanness and/or arrogance; they are the absolutely necessary breve before he blares out his concern.

*moments of agony and moments of glory
march across my roof.*

*the cat walks by
seeming to know everything.*

*my luck has been better, I think,
than the luck of the cut gladiolus,
although I am not sure.*

*I have been loved by many women,
and for a hunchback of life,
that's lucky.*

*so many fingers pushing through my hair
so many arms holding me close
so many shoes thrown carelessly on my bedroom
rug.*

*so many searching hearts
now fixed in my memory that
i'll go to my death,
remembering.*

*I have been treated better than I should have
been—
not by life in general
nor by the machinery of things
but by women.*

*but there have been other women
who have left me
standing in the bedroom alone
doubled over—
hands holding the gut—
thinking
why why why why why?*

*women go to men who are pigs
women go to men with dead souls
women go to men who fuck badly
women go to shadows of men
women go
go
because they must go
in the order of
things.*

*the women know better
but often chose out of
disorder and confusion.*

*they can heal with their touch
they can kill what they touch and
I am dying
but not dead
yet.*

(That ^ might have gotten your back up, because it pattern-matches to modern whining about women's choices. But it isn't that: remember, from above, that he is calling himself a pig and a dead soul.)

This is three books written over thirty years, one sentence per ten lines as always, stapled together to give the impression of a late-life opus. It covers the whole lot: his Great Depression origin myth; his meaningless, crabbed middle years; and his long, long late period spent in contempt of the arty people who pay and applaud him.

*that was my way of getting even
for Igloo.*

*...we took him in.
Igloo turned out to be rather dumb
did not respond to very much
had no life or joy in him
just stuck out his tongue
panted
slept most of the time
when he wasn't eating...*

*when he was run over by an
icecream truck
3 or 4 months later
and died in a stream of scarlet
I didn't feel more than the
usual amount of grief
and loss
and I was still glad that I
had managed to
break Eddie's leg.*

I am nothing like him, except maybe in sense of humour. He is not anti-modern - grew up through the Great Depression, a simulation of pre-modern subsistence; loves shit cars; lives for late night recorded music - but science, growth, and the expanding circle give him nothing of the sense of direction, transcendence and hope that it gives to me and mine. But still I "relate", as the disgusting verb puts it.

I have read this a half-dozen times over a dozen years. (It isn't hard; it takes maybe an hour and a half.) I know of no better poet to *begin* to explain why poetry is good and unique and feeds life. Whether or not this says something about my own character: I don't expect to stop reading it.

5/5.

PS: Bukowski's epitaph is "Don't try". On the face of it that's mean and funny and fine, but it also means what Yoda means by it: don't force it. Don't betray your nature; do only what you are absolutely aligned behind. Is that good advice? Maybe not, but it is epitomises the man, more than the nihilistic joke.

Strangers Drowning (2015) by Larissa MacFarquhar



"Optikaa" (c) Zaky Arifin (2015)

I don't know whether there are any moral saints. But if there are, I am glad that neither I nor those about whom I care most are among them... The moral virtues, present... to an extreme degree, are apt to crowd out the non-moral virtues, as well as many of the interests and personal characteristics that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character... there seems to be a limit to how much morality we can stand.

– Susan Wolf

...the moral narcissist's extreme humility masked a dreadful pride. Ordinary people could accept that they had faults; the moral narcissist could not. To [André] Green this moral straining was sinister, for the moral narcissist would do anything to preserve his purity, even when doing so carried a terrible price... new qualifiers appeared: there was "pseudo-altruism", a defensive cloak for sadomasochism; and there was "psychotic altruism", bizarre care-taking behaviour based in delusion... the analyst surmised that the masking of their own hostility and greed from themselves might be one of altruism's functions for people of this type.

– Larissa MacFarquhar †

...we cannot and should not become impartial, [Bernard Williams] argued, because doing so would mean abandoning what gives human life meaning. Without selfish partiality—to people you are deeply attached to, your wife and your children, your friends, to work that you love and that is particularly yours, to beauty, to place — we are nothing. We are creatures of intimacy and kinship and loyalty, not blind servants of the world.

— Larissa MacFarquhar [†]

Twelve profiles of recent radical altruists, and the backlash they receive from the rest of us. (^) Besides, MacFarquhar has some deep reflections on the good life and human nature to work through. So: There are people who shape their lives around the need of the world – in particular around strangers who are constantly, in some sense, drowning. This category of person does more than just work a caring job and be dead nice to those around them: instead, their entire lives are dominated by the attempt to do the *most* good.

The profiled altruists are:

- A fairly fearless nurse who organised the Fast for Life and trained generations of Nicaraguan nurses, continuing for thirty years despite specific threats to her life by Contras.
- A pseudonymous animal rights activist who has rescued or won improved conditions for millions of chickens.
- Two early effective altruists, Julia and Jeff, who live frugally and donate more than half of their salaries to the most effective NGOs in the world. They plausibly save 100 lives a year, far more than a doctor or firefighter (even before considering replaceability).
- A real Christian, who opened her church to the homeless (over the hostility of her flock) and donated a kidney anonymously.
- A charismatic, outcaste social worker and jungle statesman, who created a self-sustaining leper ashram, 5000-strong, out of nothing. Also his equally hardcore descendants.
- A Buddhist monk who created the largest suicide counselling site in Japan, stressing himself into heart disease.
- The omni-parents of Vermont, who adopted 24 of the least cute and easy children on the lists.
- A taciturn altruistic kidney donor.
- A burned-out idealist.

(I've compiled data on their nature here.*)

MacFarquhar appears suspicious about these people, whose lives are taken over by their morals. She calls them "do-gooders" while admitting the term is dismissive.** Even the most humble and quiet do-gooder is, she thinks, making an extremely arrogant claim: that the moral intuitions of the whole species - i.e. family favouritism, supererogation, the right to ignore the suffering of strangers - are totally wrong. She leaves no-one unsuspected.

an extreme morality as Singer's or Godwin's can seem not just oppressively demanding but actually evil, because it violates your duty to yourself. To require a person to think of himself as a tool for the general good could be seen as equivalent of kidnapping a person off the street and harvesting his organs to save three or four lives... even to ask this of yourself seems wrong, even perverted. Impartial, universal love seems the antithesis of what we value about deep human attachment.†

I see these lives as victory laps: the victory of broad reason over narrow animality. MacFarquhar is more nuanced, less willing to dismiss particularism, nepotism and speciesism – which are together known as common sense. (Though I have only a mild case of the radicals: for instance, I am mostly immune to misery about the state of the world, and I help my loved ones without much guilt. I'm giving 10% now and 50% eventually, but I am such a bookish scruff that the absence of luxuries does not really cramp my life at all.)

One part of Williams' humanist case against radical altruism has dissolved in the last decade: the idea that single-minded ethical focus must erode your connection to your community. Well, the effective altruists are growing in number and maturity; they offer a deep, global community of at least partially serious people to support and be supported by: and all with the stamp of moral consistency.

MacFarquhar doesn't much like utilitarianism, but she is too moved and impressed with her subjects to take the standard, safe, quietist line (which her reviewers have tended to). Throughout, she presents contradictory philosophical propositions, and makes it difficult to know which she believes; she constantly uses indirect speech and deictic discussion, blurring her voice with the debate at hand. This is, I think, an impressive rhetorical strategy – an "esoteric" one. The book is addressed to common sense readers, but also to our uncertainty and faint guilt; it's dedicated to her parents, but explicitly

constructed to bring us closer to the altruists:

*I took out all the physical descriptions because if you're looking at someone's physical appearance, you're on the outside. Similarly quotations, which seem as though they should be the most intimate form, because they come directly from the person's mouth. Again, in fact, the only way you hear someone speaking is if you're outside them. So if you translate quotation into interior thought, which simply means taking away the quotation marks and saying 'he thought' rather than 'he said' – that's a more intimate way of encountering someone. ****

So *Strangers Drowning* covertly brings us closer to radical altruism. Her task is not to establish their ethical premises, nor to win over new obsessives: instead, she simply shows us their sincerity and incredible effects on the world – and, better, shows the lack of evidence and interpretive charity behind their opponents' aspersions. (This goes for the Freudians, the Objectivists, and the anti "codependency" crowd.) It humanises the threatening side of ultimate goodness. She mostly avoids editorialising about the radicals. But one of her clear conclusions is that these people are not deficient, instead having something most people lack:

What do-gooders lack is not happiness but innocence. They lack that happy blindness that allows most people, most of the time, to shut their minds to what is unbearable. Do-gooders have forced themselves to know, and keep on knowing, that everything they do affects other people, and that sometimes (though not always) their joy is purchased with other people's joy. And, remembering that, they open themselves to a sense of unlimited, crushing responsibility...

The need of the world was like death, [Julia] thought — everyone knew about it, but the thought was so annihilating that they had to push it out of consciousness or it would crush them. She understood, and yet did not understand, why other people didn't give more than they did. How did they allow themselves such permission? How could they not help?

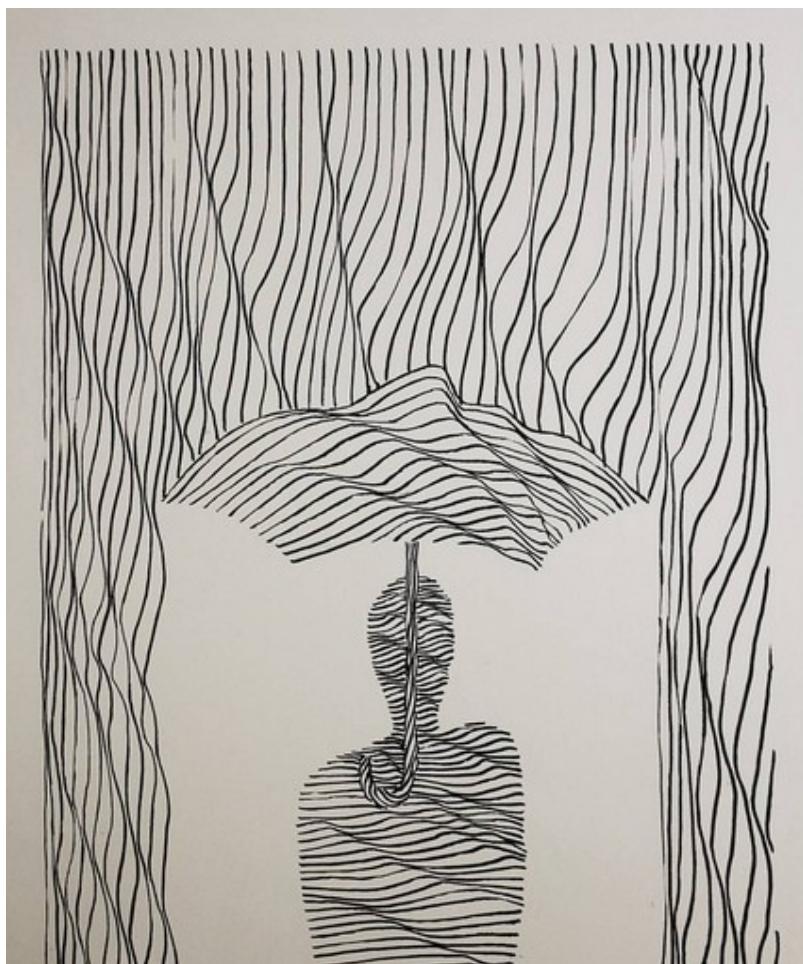
while also noting that, in general

If there is a struggle between morality and life, life will win... Not always, not in every case, but life will win in the end. Sometimes a person will die for a cause; sometimes a person will give up for duty's sake the things that are to him most precious. But most of the time, the urge to live, to give to your family, to seek beauty, to act spontaneously... or to do any number of things other than helping people, is too strong to be overridden... It may be

true that not everyone should be a do-gooder. But it is also true that these strange, hopeful, tough, idealistic, demanding, life-threatening, and relentless people, by their extravagant example, help keep those life-sustaining qualities alive.

An amazing book, anyway: charged, critical, structurally ingenious, and filled with humanity – or, with this other, better thing.

4*/5.



"Sedia hujan sebelum payung" (c) Zaky Arifin (2015)

[†] Note the absent quotation marks around MacFarquhar's report of the psychoanalysts' and Williams' positions. I talk about what I think she's up to here.

The chapter on the blitheness and cruelty of psychoanalysts enraged me - all

the more because MacFarquhar leaves their unscientific bullshit unchallenged, instead letting it mock and degrade itself. (One hopes.) *So much glibness and spite:*

ANNA FREUD: *Altruists are bossy, because the urge that is usually behind the fulfillment of one's own wishes is now placed behind the fulfillment of the wishes of another person. The wishes have to be fulfilled in a certain way, in the way the altruist would like to fulfill them for himself or herself. After all, the bossiness of do-gooders is proverbial...*

(My, what rigorous science.) So, here's yet *another* way I am fortunate to live when I do: these people have by now been mostly sidelined in polite discourse. The harm they are able to do is much reduced, and I need not spend my whole life convincing people that they are just making things up.

◊

* Philosophy - e.g. Peter Singer, Will MacAskill, Toby Ord, Mark Lee, Geoff Anders, Stephanie Wykstra - looms large here, in this little corner of the race; larger than organised religion. Since all of the philosophers are from Analytic departments, this gives the lie to the generalised standard criticism of academic philosophy (: that they are fatally detached from the concerns of society, dehumanised, etc). ◊

** "Do-gooder" is still much better than Susan Wolf's term, "moral saint", because, as MacFarquhar notes, to call someone a saint is to nullify the challenge of their difficult actions: saints are not just 'people who do really good things'; they are (thought to be) a different sort of being. Any movement (like EA) which seeks to make radical altruism mainstream has to resist this demarcation and get people to see such a life as, first, good; then, possible for them; and then reasonable - the sort of thing that people would do if they thought about it more.

*** MacFarquhar's account of Stephanie is misleading: she makes it seem like she has opted for ordinary amoral innocence, where the real Stephanie has taken on an incredibly high-impact job, activism for oversight of pharmaceutical clinical trial data.

I think you'll find it's a bit more complicated than that (2014)



Quantum Healing

- **Deepak Chopra:** ability of the mind to spontaneously correct the mistakes of the body
- Physical bodies are “intelligent fields of energy”
- QH involves a shift in these energy fields
- Heal the mind → heal the body
- **Royal Raymond Rife:** inventor of Universal Microscope and Rife Frequency Instrument → certain frequencies destroy various disease organisms



A hundred clear, witty, and literate attacks on the agreeable nonempiricism that most worldviews and most conversations are based in, even in the modernised, developed world. (It covers such anti-scientific fields as alternative medicine, journalism, politics, and policy. You may regard anti-vaxxers, face cream 'science', homeopathy, and AIDS denialism as too obviously false to be worth your time deriding. But these hopeful, manipulative falsehoods are where many if not most live: someone has to defend people.)

This makes it a collection of a hundred enjoyable tutorials in statistics, experimental method, and epistemology:

Alternative therapists don't kill many people, but they do make a great teaching tool for the basics of evidence-based medicine, because their efforts to distort science are so extreme. When they pervert the activities of people who should know better – medicines regulators, or universities – it throws sharp relief onto the role of science and evidence in culture...

Goldacre is a gifted populariser: by focussing on particular abuses, he is able to animate very hard and theoretical topics by leveraging our anger, or our humour. (In a similar way to Nassim Taleb's snark. Of course, as strict empiricists, the two men share many

targets: the powerful and overconfident, the famed and hollow, the predatory and avaricious). Since British libel law opens him to constant financial hazard, *even when he is entirely careful and correct*, he calls his writing "pop science with a gun to your head". (Actually it is mostly pop metascience; even better. There are shout-outs to the great critics of C20th science: Celia Mulrow, John Ioannidis, Uri Simonsohn, who are too-rarely praised; for they turned on the people who might otherwise have lionised them.)

He shows policy analysis to be lagging a century behind the standard set by medical trials, and not mostly for the good reasons (which are: that they have a more causally dense subject than medicine has; and because they face absolute ethical restrictions on their experiments: it is politically impossible to experiment with welfare systems). e.g.: Policy people set *no* required evidence threshold before administering their treatments en masse, have no controls, no randomisation, no calibration, no statements of formal uncertainty, no malpractice system to punish their recklessness, nor often any honest fucking posthoc *evaluation* of their treatment.

[Andrew Lansley's] pretence at data-driven neutrality is not just irritating, it's also hard to admire. There's no need to hide behind a cloak of scientific authority, murmuring the word "evidence" into microphones. If your reforms are a matter of ideology, legacy, whim and faith, then, like many of your predecessors, you could simply say so, and leave "evidence" to people who mean it.

Journalists come across as badly as the quacks - even BBC, Panorama, C4 News. This may be being ameliorated at last by the rise of the specialised blogospheres and by the Nate Silver / Rich Harris / Keith Frey school of data journalism. But not generally yet and not for sure.

I love his rationalist war-cry, against the public and dinner-party proponents of the never-supported MMR -autism link:

Many of these people were hardline extremists - humanities graduates - who treated my arguments about evidence as if I were some kind of religious zealot, a purveyor of scientism, a fool to be pitied. The time had clearly come to mount a massive counter-attack.

...nerds are more powerful than we know. Changing mainstream media will be hard, but you can help create parallel options. More academics should

blog, post videos, post audio, post lectures, offer articles and more. You'll enjoy it: I've had threats and blackmail, abuse, smears and formal complaints with forged documentation. But it's worth it, for one simple reason: pulling bad science apart is the best teaching gimmick I know for explaining how good science works. I'm not a policeman, and I've never set out to produce a long list of what's right and what's wrong. For me, things have to be interestingly wrong, and the methods are all that matter.

His website is a bit ugly but has most of this content for free; the extras in this volume are oddities for fans (an undergraduate paper of his, BMJ editorials and notes from his heartening rise into British policy establishment (he is a public health researcher at the NHS). This was my second pass at his columns; I was again refreshed and uplifted and enraged. We might despair at how persistent insensitivity to evidence has been, and at how unnatural empiricism remains, in a society totally transformed by it. But I don't despair, because it has never been easier for us to check and rebut liars and fools. I sincerely aspire to become a "research parasite" (an independent checker of analyses, a rogue forensic statistician) and to write as clearly and well as him.

Goldacre is that rare thing, someone doing the best work they possibly could be. (If he could be persuaded to migrate to the global south...)

5?/5.

Curiosity (2012) by Philip Ball.

- why is the sea salty?
- have animals souls, or intelligence?
- has opinion its foundation in the animate body?
- why do human beings not have horns?
- how is it that sound in its passage makes its way through any obstacle whatever?
- how is it that joy can be the cause of tears?
- why are the fingers of unequal length?
- why, if you have intercourse with a woman after she has lain with a leper, will you catch the disease while she will escape?
- what reason is there for the universality of death?
- why do we need food so frequently, or at all?
- why are the living afraid of the bodies of the dead?
- how is the globe supported in the middle of the air?
- why does the inflow of the rivers not increase the bulk of the ocean?
- why, if a vessel be full and its lower part open, does water not issue from it unless the upper lid be first removed?
- when one atom is moved, are all moved? (since whatever is in a state of motion moves something else, thus setting up infinite motion.)
- why do winds travel along the earth's surface and not in an upward direction?
- why does a sort of perpetual shadow brood over the moon?
- granted that the stars are alive, on what food do they live?
- ought we regard the cosmos as an inanimate body, a living thing, or a god?

— Adelard of Bath (c.1120)

“How Science Became Interested in Everything”. Another history of the origins of science: our long trek to GWAS, livermorium, and CERN via astrology,

natural magic, alchemy, Neoplatonism, herbalism, occultism, and philosophy. So, superficially, the book is just about an especially fruity context of discovery. But this period holds two of the most important lessons in history:

- 1) science grew out of work by people who diverge wildly from the modern idea and practice of science, whose variously false frameworks led to the Royal Society and e.g. the Newtonian triumph. (And from there to contemporary, professional, university science.) So wrong people can still make progress if their errors are uncorrelated with the prevailing errors. And
- 2) a small number of the most powerful people in Britain - the Lord Chancellor, the king's physicians, the chaplain of the young Elector Palatine and bishop of Chester, London's great architect, Privy Councillors⁷ - successfully pushed a massive philosophical change, and thereby contributed to most of our greatest achievements: smallpox eradication, Sputnik and Voyager, the Green Revolution, and the unmanageably broad boons of computing are partly theirs.

The received view of all this is one-dimensional: you have superstitious, pompous cretins at one end and rational, experimental moderns at the other. But really you need five axes before you get a basic understanding of the great, great revolution that began in the C16th - before you can see how science differs from every other community:

7. Bacon has some claim to being the most influential philosopher ever, in terms of counterfactual effect on history. (Rather than number of bloody citations!) No-one with his social standing was resisting the Aristotelian consensus in 1620; his prototype scientific method is a century ahead of its time. (Yes, [ibn al-Haytham's](#) was 7 centuries ahead of its time, but to limited avail.)

- **Supernaturalism vs Naturalism.** Did they explain things solely in terms of natural causes? (Absentee Gods only.)
- **Apriori vs Aposteriori.** Did they view actual observation as decisive and indispensable?⁸
- **Qualitative vs Quantitative.** Did they make measurements? Did they model the data? Did they use standard units?
- **Holism vs Reductionism.** Did they analyse things into their constituent features? Did they explain phenomena in terms of ?
- **Infallibilism vs Fallibilism.** Did they allow for the possibility of error? Did they view uncertain knowledge as still worthwhile?^{9 10}

8. This one is hard to refer to, because we now find it incredibly easy to understand why "go and look" works as a general route to knowledge; Medieval thought rejected this on the basis of things like the problem of induction.

The cliched way to refer to the split between those who want to *start* with the apriori and those who want to start with data is "Rationalism" vs "Empiricism". But these words confuse people: the two of them are also used in a C17th debate about psychology, to do with the nature of mental content. More: it can't be a dichotomy, since many of the greatest rationalists (Descartes, Leibniz) were experimentalists too, doing what we now call empirical work. Three meanings of rationalism, and three words for them:

- **Continental rationalism:** Belief in innate ideas. Descartes and Leibniz but not Dawkins and Shermer.
 - **Apriorism:** Belief in the supremacy of apriori knowledge over empirical knowledge. Aristotle was apriorist, and Descartes.
 - **Modern skepticism:** Belief that everything should be subject to reason and evidence. Includes Descartes and Leibniz and Dawkins and Shermer. Contemporary rationalists are highly if not radically empiricist.
- 9 Hard to imagine a fallibilist apriorist: perhaps Lakatos. (Some say Leibniz was, in practice.) I actually have met a methodist infallibilist apriorist, but I won't meet another.
- 10 I had included "openness" in the model -

Obscurantism vs Openness. Did they write in the vernacular? Did they publish for a wide readership? Did they spurn Noble Lies? Did they encourage replications with and data sharing? Did they build scholarly networks?

- but I admit this is just wishful/normative thinking: modern academic science fails at this. Things can be science without being published, obviously: consider the invention of public key cryptography by a GCHQ wonk, classified for 25 years - or even the secret infrastructure and algorithmics of high-frequency trading. And, whether with the low status of replications, the unreadable prose, the paywalls on most research (tax-funded or no), the pathetically low levels of data sharing, or the prevalence of noble lies... But it's definitely a core *aspiration* now: the greedy impulse behind hermeticism is blatantly unscientific, if not actually shunned by actual scientists. First, lip service...

So I'm modelling science as naturalist, fallibilist, quantitative empiricism with pretensions to openness. I've categorised the early scientists mentioned in *Curiosity* according to this: you can see the data with additional justifications here. (Ball doesn't state this model, but it floats around in his debunkings and "well actually"s.)

Proto-scientist	Floreat	Naturalis	Aposteriori	Quantitativus	Reductio ad absurdum	Fallibilism	Open?	Modernness	
Aristotle	C-6th	Y	N	N	N	N	N	17%	Reference bad scientist
Nicolaus Copernicus	C16th	?	?	Y	?	?	Y	33%	
Francis Bacon	eC17th	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	100%	Reference cheerleader
ibn al-Haytham	C11th	?	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	67%	
Rene Descartes	C17th	N	?	Y	Y	N	?	33%	
Galileo Galilei	C17th	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	83%	
Giambattista della Porta	C16th	N	Y	?	?	?	Y	33%	
Gottfried Leibniz	C17th	N	?	Y	Y	?	Y	50%	
Johannes Kepler	C17th	N	Y	Y	Y	N	?	50%	
Tycho Brahe	C16th	N	N	Y	?	N	N	17%	
Christiaan Huygens	C17th	Y	Y	Y	Y	?	Y	83%	
Robert Hooke	C17th	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	100%	
Isaac Newton	C17th	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	?	67%	
Thomas Hobbes	C17th	Y	N	N	N	N	?	17%	Reference troll
Margaret Cavendish	C17th	Y	N	N	N	N	?	17%	

Obviously these five factors aren't the end of the matter either. But I reckon it catches a decent amount of the variance in the term "scientist". Others e.g.

- **Particularism vs Consilience.** Did they believe that the scientific method could explain every phenomenon?
- **Realism vs Instrumentalism.** Most scientists are realists about best current theories
- **Theism vs Nontheism.** I had included non-theism in the core of modern science - and so it is, in the form of strong naturalism. Scientists, on the other hand, differ from this, globally. This is partially because humans are so compartmentalised and can hold severe contradictions indefinitely. But, clearly, atheism is not an essential part of the modern method. But causal closure and (at most) a *private* faith are.

I use Alberto Vanzo's criteria for deciding if someone was enough of an experimentalist:

let us consider four typical features of early modern experimental philosophers:

- self-descriptions: *experimental philosophers typically called themselves such. At the very least, they professed their sympathy towards experimental philosophy.*
- friends and foes: *experimental philosophers saw themselves as part of a tradition whose “patriarch” was Bacon and whose sworn enemy was Cartesian natural philosophy.*
- method: *experimental philosophers put forward a two-stage model of natural philosophical inquiry: first, collect data by means of experiments and observations; second, build theories on the basis of them. In general, experimental philosophers emphasized the a posteriori origins of our knowledge of nature and they were wary of a priori reasonings.*
- rhetoric: *in the jargon of experimental philosophers, the terms “experiments” and “observations” are good, “hypotheses” and “speculations” are bad. They were often described as fictions, romances, or castles in the air.*

This is unusually inclusive: the famous Rationalist Leibniz counts as experimental under this rubric. But a stronger definition of aposteriorist - like "refuses to use purely analytic reasoning", or even "spent most of their time running experiments and analysing data" would exclude many contemporary scientists. Sticking with Vanzo for now.

All of the pieces of science are very ancient - we had mathematics and data collection well before the Ten Commandments, naturalism before Buddha and Confucius, reductionism before the Peloponnesian War at least one controlled trial centuries before Christ, fallibilism likewise. Everything was ready BCE; we can see indirect evidence of this in the astonishing works of Ancient Greek engineers, mostly unmatched for 1000 years until y'know.

So the question is not "was Bacon the most original blah blah?": he wasn't, particularly when you remember Alhazen's Baconian method, developed in the C11th. But we need an explanation for how we messed it up so badly. The received view, which is all I have at the moment, is that the fall of Rome, Christian anti-intellectualism and, later, the enshrining of Aristotelian mistakes was enough to destroy and suppress the ideas. I want deeper explanations though. (For instance, what did we do to the economy?)

A fun regression on this data would be to see how my scienciness measure correlates

with the importance of the person's work. It would not be that highly proportional, in this time period.

Back to the book eh! Structure is lots of little chapters on fairly disjointed topics: early modern ideas of space travel, universal language, pumps, etc. Chapter on "cabinets of curiosity" is great though: suddenly their dull zany blare makes sense and I want to build one:

this was more than a case of 'look what I've got'. The power with which Wunderkammern were imbued was... in that they created their own complete microcosm: a representation of the world in miniature... By possessing this microcosm the collector-prince was not just symbolising but also in a sense exercising his mastery of the world. The cabinet acted as a kind of mental laboratory within which the relationships between things could be contemplated via a process that shared elements of both experimentation and Gnostic revelation.

Ball doesn't like us calling the Scientific Revolution a revolution, and I agree: the revolution didn't consist in the theories of Bacon or Newton: it consists in the diffusion of the worldview into all subjects and all inquiry. It transformed society and gave us marvels, but it hasn't finished happening. The general will, or default state, is still strongly unscientific. (The largest and most grievous holdout, larger even than the enduring hold of fideist religion, is our tribal politics and our largely nonempirical government policy.)

Ball expends a lot of time on a history of wonder vs curiosity vs dispassionate robot inquiry. People hated all of these things for various reasons, up until the Renaissance when curiosity became acceptable on what are now classic economic grounds, or in line with the Italian cult of the virtuoso - someone who's so bloody brilliant that you have to just let him get on with it.

I always like Ball's drawling prose and catty editorialising. (For instance, Margaret Cavendish - the darling of arts academics who latch on to the only woman in sight in this period - gets a round dissing by Ball, as an anti-experiment idiot, a vitalist, and a misogynist.) Stimulating as always.

4/5.

Colophon

The cover image is from the British Library archive and is of what Nietzsche called a *Bildungsphilister*, that shallow, aggressive amateur pundit that every middle class person feels some need to be.

The manuscript was prepared in LibreOffice.

(*"To choose between proprietary software is to be able to choose your master. Freedom means not having a master. And in the area of computing, freedom means not using proprietary software."* -RMS.)

The cover and inner font is Liberation Serif.

This text contains many solecisms and obscurities; these should be taken to be due to the absence of all hypertext references, which can be found in the original at

<http://afterallitcouldbeworse.blogspot.com/search/label/books>.

or, if you come to this later in the century, post-Google, at

http://web.archive.org/web/*/afterallitcouldbeworse.blogspot.com

The author is a data scientist and an effective altruist, whatever those are. He has lived in the north of Scotland, Beijing, Kagera, and London. He was kind of educated at Aberdeen and Glasgow, but better herein, and better yet to come.

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