An Ornet Paulein Reader

A K$_n$ife Across All Things:

Walker's Crystal and Additive Conspiracy

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Introduction

Two weeks preceding Benjamin Walker's death, a fire destroyed a good part of the apartment complex across the street from his house. Having watched the ordeal all day, he wrote that night in his journal:

Usually, when one watches a fire for a very long time, we might say they have fallen under its spell, been hypnotized—for the candle flame or the wood-stove are not, we smile, really saying anything interesting. There is no information in the fire, no matter how long you look; it is just a kaleidoscope and nothing more. (kalos: beautiful and eidos: form.) You might sit, or I might, off to the side of the wood-stove and amuse yourself, or I myself, by whoever is seated over in front of the fire, looking in. No real judgement or condescension, it is simply the privilege of those outside the thrall to giggle, and the spellbound are consoled by the fire.

Lisa, who went for groceries today (walking, since the road was shut down) said it had caught in a Spanish family's apartment, when an under-table heater set its own blanket burning. What infighting! I didn't see it start—which is why I felt I had to stay to watch it end—and I still can't believe how much smoke, like the building's cement was being ground off into clouds of powder.

Fire, I had started to say, when it gets hold of something really interesting, images through it like a CAT scan—as the CAT scan reveals the colloid cyst, third ventricle, the fire flashes kaloids, pearls of bone. Of course, the blaze is destructive (especially of the interesting things), it cannot be repeated or put back, entropy fireworks, no unslicing the pomegranate—so watch closely!

I've chosen this passage as an introduction, despite its non-fiction, despite its likely unfamiliarity to Walker's readers, because it possesses the characteristic set of features that I will argue define and explain his style. They are: a passivity that cannot turn to action (Walker watches the fire, entertained but unable to help or be hurt), symbols of cross-section nearing vivisection (CAT scan, half-burned objects), and the structure revealed by violence (the dollhouse revealed when the facade burns off the building, the pomegranate half)—Walker's crystal.

I'll devote three sections to those three feet, each with a short passage for illustration. They were very closely related ideas in Walker's mind (as in his writing), so, adjusting for overlap, I'll abstain from analysis until the end. If I've done my work well, the introductory passage will provide enough background that a close reading can be outsourced to the attentive reader. The analysis will not, of course, detail the use of these largely surface level themes and symbols, but rather extend them to propose an explanation for Walker's distinctive (supposed) lack of a single, consistent ideology.

Sometimes, as scholars with good intentions, or as critics with critical intentions, the farrago philosophy of work like this can provoke legitimate eye-rolls—and considering the dramatic differences in quality from one Walker text to the next, we shouldn't dismiss the possibility of charlatanism. Walker faults on so many of his attempts that it would be ridiculous *not* to doubt that the application of his ideas or even his words was not, at least at times, so holistic as to not merit the serious attention that the critical establishment has for so many years been giving it. The pattern that expresses as erratic noncommittal, I will argue, is in fact the result of Walker's deep commitment to a bizarre ideology, whose revelation herein carries with massive implications for the continuing study of his work.

1. The Passive Actor

Walker, whose adolescence was dulled by coldness of his native Augusta, began to swim seriously at 16, for his high school's team. In their traveling meets, Walker found something between escape and foreclosure, from and of a hometown philosophy he struggled to shake. Again, from his personal writing:

Augusta, I was convinced then, held a town-wide conspiracy against love. Once I started to see those other towns, though, it became a little less clear. I was able to see, of course, that most of the other towns had settled on different conspiracies, if they had any foundation at all. But I didn't find, as I had hoped, much of an argument against the Augustinian way—a positive conspiracy, the sort you'd have to declare at customs.

Years later, probably around the time he wrote that reflection, he began the novel that would become *A Monkey Language.* Consider the following passage, what most agree to be the novel's climax, in which the narrator and xgonist, Augustín, goes out for a walk.

I looked up from my work, it could only have been eight o'clock or so, and saw by the streetlamp that the snow was still falling. Assuming it hadn't stopped since I last went to the window, there would've fallen at least a foot already. And though I'd really not made much progress on the plans (and today was to be the day for plan-making progress), I was overcome by the idyll outside my darling little window and resolved to go out for a walk as soon as I finished drawing up the segment I'd just begun. If I'd have left right away I surely would have forgot what I meant by the initial markings; not so much forgotten my place but where I intended to go from it—so you see, really I would have lost more time leaving right then.

Twenty minutes later I was out the door and moving north, heading toward the main road. At least a foot indeed! I wonder why I thought that. It couldn't have been more than six or seven inches, at least on the sidewalks—probably the neighbors had shoveled earlier on in the storm, maybe it had looked to be letting up, maybe they just wanted to get out ahead of it, probably I should have shoveled too, so many old people on my street. I moved off the sidewalk into the deeper, untouched snow of the gutter. I can shovel later tonight provided the streetlamp stay on, I thought, then said aloud, hoping to invoke a curse, surely a power outage is in the occult's own interests as well as mine, between the candles and the darkness. Maybe some great

ghost will come knock my streetlight over like a mailbox, no one would blame me for not shoveling my walk then, why, there's a live wire, it's probably knocked poor Augustín's power out entirely, that can't be good, he never did look well, yes, another voice comes in, and that was when he had power, that's just how I mean, says the first, probably we ought to bring him some fruit breads and a large thermos of black-currant drink, yes, yes, best make it a growler in fact, for his streetlamp's been knocked over like a mailbox, yes, replies the second voice, but we'll have to come to the back door to be safe, yes, says the first, no matter, since the doorbell at the front won't be working anyway.

Out across the road, more behind the fog than the snow, for the snow was becoming more sparse now, a figure had drawn up parallel to me on the opposite sidewalk. (Surely the snow wouldn't be letting up already?) Could be that the figure had always been there (the road bellies out to accommodate more parking back where I'd started my walk), no, the fog's not so serious as all that, I thought, and the snow has thinned to a lazy flurry. Maybe it's just a lull; or better yet: the eye.

The main road, which I imagined I'd find mostly untouched, all buried fool and new, had been plowed, by the looks of it, within the hour. Out of sight in the fog, I suppose it must have been a considerable fog really, certainly nothing for sailing in, the plows were shifting along. They must have been going towards town, yellow dogs, noses to the ground.

It didn't seem fair to me, then. I looked again for my friend, perhaps we who have such similar taste in streets might laugh together at this peasant spread: What sort of stuff is this with which to make a moment? Give me a show, gale-force winds or sideways rain, some spectacle to ignore while I think some serious thoughts! Every passing day I'm taller, and everything that hurts hurts more.

I could make out his black overcoat in the direction of town; traitor!, I thought, he's gone chasing the plows.

2. The Cross Section

A cross section is usually understood to be the intersection (right or parallel) of a plane and some three-dimensional object. For a cylinder, you could have cross sections of circles or of rectangles, for spheres, only circles of different sizes. A section taken at a non-right angle is not a proper cross-section, but it is a section, and in fact these skewed cuts often generate the more interesting slices. I may use these terms interchangeably. From a conic, for example, different sections produce a whole family of related shapes: ellipses, parabolas, hyperbolas. It is the third dimension expressed onto the second, with all the erratic behavior of a higher-dimensional object. (Pop scientists might even have you believe that our world, each instantaneous second of it, is a four-dimensional world, falling across the plane of time.)

http://www.math.union.edu/~dpvc/math/4D/cube-flatland/Cube-Slice-Corner/Cube-Slice-Corner.gif

Walker, who used to carve slivers off of his wooden furniture, loved these sections. In college, he convinced a friend of his at the medical school to let him attend an autopsy. Perhaps

expecting something more like a dissection, or even a bisection (the cadaver split the long way as though fed through a table saw), he was accordingly repulsed.

His love often showed through in food, or in his writing about foods: marbled cakes, stuffed peppers and fruits, vegetables cut on bias. It is, in fact, so prevalent a theme in his writing that choosing a representative example would be redundant. (It has already shown up in the journal passage, in the MRI imaging, and in the passage from *A Monkey Language* as the appearance and disappearance of things in the snowstorm, where the "frame" is the storm's visibility.) Instead, I've included Walker's investigation into the denial of the cross-section, an object that does not yield its interior. It comes from the short story *Subka-Subka.*

In it, a certain Mr. Pollar finds a strange device hidden in the basement of his building one day while doing laundry. Desperately curious to find out its function, he tells no one. Each night, as he steals downstairs to visit it (past the first floor unit, where a young couple lives), he imagines different functions for the device. He soon becomes worried about a dangerous possibility, less so for himself than for the young couple who would be the first impacted.

It's true, Mr. Pollar thought coming up the basement steps, that it's foolish of me to envy them, for they don't know the device, I must remember that. They would not, as I will, feel a great satisfaction when it activates. Probably, whatever it does, it will scare them very badly, and were it something bad, they would only be hurt by the experience. He paused a moment, for by now he had arrived at the door to their apartment, and his thoughts took the beat with his body.

Yes, Mr. Pollar thought, it is good that I can still think in these terms, it means I have not lost perspective. They don't know about the device, and if I don't help them to leave this place, they will only come to know it in a violent way. I will evict them, it is the only thing to do, and luckily also the right one. No matter that we are both tenants of equally poor footing in the building's economy, for mine will be a psychological eviction; they will be convinced—they will convince themselves, let's have it reflexively—to leave.

Wind came suddenly through Mr. Pollar, in at the small of his back and harshly out his mouth; he wanted to cry out, for it is not often he had occasion to shout in pain, but it felt as if his throat had been stripped, some thick coating now removed. The pieces could no longer touch together; they just stretched out at each other across the space, unable to get vibrating. Not even his tongue could reach the roof of his mouth. Perhaps it was better that way, at least in this state, for without its coating the entire mechanism felt raw, with rough open pores like a strawberry or a cat's tongue.

Upstairs he considered a plan of action while preparing a glass of tea. Of course, he would need to fabricate some sort of plot in which to implicate (within the fabrication of course) the couple downstairs. No other real option, beyond patience, existed. Something believable—espionage or organized crime would work. Those specifics could be sorted out later, maybe as easily as with the roll of a die, the implementation detail that presented itself now was the method of communication. Yes, Mr. Pollar thought, a plan is not like a brain, or a spring, there is no danger here in doing a little ironing.

Now that the dairy grease in the tea had begun to coat his throat again, he felt as though he could swallow a pole. It was, he fancied, the ideal receptive state in which to brood over the communication question just posed. He sat there for a very long time, without properly thinking,

for anyone can think, it is an impulse of the lowest sort; that it is unique to man (for now, signs the chimpanzee, darkly) only pulls us lower still, lonely and base. Emerging from his thoughtless reverie, Mr. Pollar stood up, gathered the necessary materials, and began to work.

On the table he poured out a container of sugar cubes next to a file for the rough cuts, and razor blade for the finer ones. To aid his unfocused eyes during the procedure, he dug out a jeweler's loupe and a pair of reading glasses, whose choice was again determined by the scale of the present detail.

First he manufactured a test. Working slowly and without any reference image, he began to carve off the obviously wrong parts of the selected sugar cube. The material came away easily in sandy slides, and after four or five minutes with the file he had succeeded in realizing the rough outline of the device. He switched to the more precise set of tools and moved into the finer details: tubes, buttons, plates. He found the work natural and calm, and although he could certainly have gone on refining the icon for many more hours—so precise was the image in his head—he was eager to move on to the next step.

Into a glass of water placed in front of the articulating head of his desk lamp he lowered the sculpture. At the beginning, he removed it every fifteen seconds, and then in closer intervals toward the end, allowing it to dry completely each time before resubmerging it. The surface, the first contact with the water, was always the first to go, each point changing allegiances at the same time, sloughing off into the clouded slurry. The sculpture contracted by a few grains uniformly at each interval, so that by the end of the process Mr. Pollar had in the crotch of his palm a true miniature. It wasn't any more than half a centimeter across, but the compression had preserved all the fidelity of the original and, Mr. Pollar thought, had the sugar voxels been finer, could have been even smaller. I will carry it with me always, he said to himself, and slipped it into his pocket. Now I may begin in earnest.

3. The Crystal

While abroad in Genoa in the 1980s, Benjamin wrote *O Tare*, perhaps his most successful novel among the general public, if not with critics. It follows a jewel thief who becomes obsessed with legends of a "complete" diamond stolen, used, and protected a series of powerful and mysterious historical figures. The thief travels to Guatemala to follow through on a lead.

Noise eventually spoke my window open, drowning the radio to the few capital sounds of the Spanish tongue: S tunnels, a vowel cup, sometimes a snare. I turned the radio off, planning to switch it back on as soon as the noise went away, but instead I found the hotel's notepad and fell back to the diamond. I rehearsed my explanation, the one I intended to give to Borca that night, not so much for practice as to indulge the routine. It went like this:

On the first sheet I draw a circle, and color it in. This is a point, and it is not the start of anything, but it is the end of itself, for it will not connect to anything without becoming a line. I rip off this piece of paper and set it aside.

Next I draw a line, for we were bored with the point, it is going nowhere, so we have made it go somewhere. What was there to be afraid of? Not only is the point still there, at the

start of the line, but now there is another point too, and between them a language. This too I place next to the notepad, underneath the point.

The third drawing begins like a combination of the first two, there is a point and underneath it a line. It's no coincidence, for even as I connect the point to the ends of the line, creating a triangle, the inspiration is obvious. The triangle is an homage to its weak forefathers, and perhaps, as a gesture of gratitude, it will allow them to rest in its hollow for a while, as there are no enclosures in the worlds of the point and the line.

Now I tear off the triangle and lay it underneath the line, and I turn and ask you a question. What comes next in this sequence? Here, draw it yourself. Probably, you'll shrug and draw me a square. It's close, I say, for you've sensed one of the patterns correctly: a new point is added every time. But the square is incomplete.

In my drawings, the points are eternal nodes. They have existed in their worlds since the very beginning. In fact, they are the axioms around which the knowledge of their world was formed. In all the time since forever ago, the people of their worlds have figured, which is to say revealed, connections from any one node to the next. I am drawing the complete accomplishment of knowledge in the n-point world. To reach the end of knowledge, to have really foreclosed, every possible relation must be proven, not just those that appear to be true, but every *connection, directly between all axioms, all nodes.*

When you show me the square, four points connected by four lines, you have shown me an adolescent world. These people are keen observers, and they have used their sense of aesthetics well to connect, in this tidy way, all of the four axioms. They may not progress for a long time, for they will feel very good about having touched every truth, in a closed loop no less —a two-dimensional figure, tidy and subordinate. And in their complacency they will delay the discovery of the final bridges.

And here I take up the pen again and add to your drawing two lines. One from the top left of the square to the bottom right, and the other from the top right to the bottom left.

This, I say, is the end of the 4-point world. There now exists a direct connection between every idea in its universe, and the structure of that knowledge has changed. We can no longer understand it as a square, for there are edges that run through the middle and even through each other, which we did not allow in the case of the triangle (3-point world's end) or the line (2-point world's end) or the point (1-point world's end).

It's not only the square—no arrangement on the paper can accommodate four points in this fully inter-woven state without some such illegal collisions. Think, though, and I turn to you again, is there a shape with 4 points, as in the drawing, each with an edge going to every other point?

It might take you a few seconds of thinking, for I have been intentionally misleading you a little (only to provide you the joy of seeing through it, I promise), but you come to it eventually. Yes, you tell me, I think there is. Oh, could you draw it for me again? I ask, smiling, and now you can smile back, no, you say, I couldn't.

Yes! A triangular pyramid. Every vertex with an edge to all the others. Notice how each successive world is built of the world below it—the triangular pyramid is made up of triangles, the triangle of lines, and the line of points. The five point world, we can't quite imagine, would be

made up of triangular pyramids. Each, too, is the unique connected figure for its dimensionality, which is how they suggest unique worlds.

It is also possible, we're nearing the diamond now, I promise, that these worlds do not end with the discovery of the complete form. Knowing, as you and I now do, that the next tier can always be built out of the current one, we might string our worlds together into a story, rather than a sequence. First, we can nest them; so that on the way to the triangle the thinkers of the 3-point world first made a point, then a line, then the true triangle. In these stories, a world comes to know itself in progressively more complex terms, what you might call recapitulation, before it reaches its own, highest, height.

So, consider our world, a world of many, many points. From those many points, an even larger number of connections are needed to complete the figure (it is, in fact, always a triangular number of connections, no coincidence). Such knowledge would be the perfect crystal of our world, for it makes use of every point in the universe as many times as possible. It would be incomprehensible in form and meaning; a mandala the shape of the next world's edge.

This, I believe, is the nature of the diamond.

Analysis

One can sometimes get the feeling reading Walker—and it is in fact a principal criticism of his work—that he has no strong feelings one way or the other. He contradicts himself constantly, in smaller surface details as well as broad philosophical matters. In the passage from *A Monkey Language*, for example, Augustín's walk is a walk through a world sometimes his and sometimes not. Now he is under the overprotective eye of an anxious god, clearing all sharp objects from view; now he is so far from the center of things that even the plows have ducked him. He can't tell if he's being punished or not, and the world seems unable to decide whether to humble him with adversity or clear him a mundane way. This confused half-climax is characteristic of Walker's writing; Walker scholar Hercule Côté called it "the refusal of a moment to crystallize."

Yet one would hardly call Walker soft in his convictions. To the contrary, he takes strong stands, either in the odd aphoristic phrase or in decisions about the makeup of a character's world or eventual fate. What is meant by such claims of philosophical apathy is not the lack of passion in individual stances, but something more like the net zero that results from rampant contradiction. If some position is not negated within a scene, it will be within the chapter, if not the chapter, the book, if not the book, somewhere else in the oeuvre. The more one reads about Walker, as a result, the less one feels to know about his actual beliefs. It is undoubtedly this feature that has drawn so much criticism of his work (in both the literal and literary senses). Since most any position has its representative passage somewhere in his prolific output, he is heavily contested territory, claimed simultaneously dozens of opposing groups.

The explanations traditionally given for this contradictory style never quite satisfy: he is a fraud, or misinterpreted, or untalented to the point of misrepresenting his own beliefs. The purpose of the present essay is to propose an alternative approach: to take him at his word. Walker, and I believe the textual evidence supports this, *did* have a consistent ideology that gave his works their unique shape. He believed, or was trying to believe, in everything.

The diamond that lies at the center of *O Tare* is the key into the world of Walker's fiction. All possible truths, which must include the contradictory ones, are included in pursuit of the richest world possible. Every idea touches every other along true lines, a network which behaves like the higher-dimensional object its nodes map too. Like his thief, Walker was hypnotized by the implications of an object with such a structure. He planned his heist, however, in novels and stories, hoping to understand its implications by writing according to its laws. There is not enough room in a novel, the reader might protest, for the intermarriage of every known concept. True, and Walker knew it; this is how we get to the cross-section.

Walker was following a curiosity about the inside of things of all scales. The device with an unknown function that so fascinates Mr. Pollar is the allegorical object of his inquiries. It is infinitely elusive, all exterior features. Even its approximation, the sugar cube, has the same teasing stubbornness: any attempt to reduce it simply draw the surface inward. The sugar cube, and by extension the device, pretend to be made of surfaces alone. It's only natural to want to watch the illusion break, like Walker at his window watching something as solid as a building fold.

Each time Walker would set out to write he allowed the details of his story (moral, physical, and otherwise) to be chosen mostly by what he called "thoughtlessness". I contend that during these inspirational whims, one of which we see in the *Subka-Subka* story, Walker believed he was taking a cross-section of the world's crystal. The short-story, he imagined, had only so many dimensions, so its stochastic subgraph must have fewer edges than the full network. The novel could accommodate a slightly higher dimensional cross-section, a cycle even more. What was interesting, to Walker, was coverage rather than depth; he mostly wrote short novels, changing the angle and level of the slice each time to attain a different sample. Where most authors' lives' work consists only in the addition of axioms, increasing the dimensionality of their personal worldview, Walker constantly abandoned ideas in order to make room for new ones. What develops in his collected work is not a single polished ideology, but a thousand thin ones. A thousand thin ones that, he believed, are indexing the inhuman structure of all potentiality. Their sum in the *additive conspiracy* the young Walker sought: the universal relation.

Conclusion

The interpretation proposed here solves the problem of Walker's allegiances (to all, rather than to none or to some special group, as others have claimed) at the potential cost of upending most traditional readings of his work. What are we to do with the writing of a man who dressed himself in beliefs at random, drawing from the most extensive possible wardrobe? What meaning can be found in such whimsical literature? We do not want to be arguing with a slot machine.

To these questions I can make no better answer than to look to the work. Walker took very seriously the connection of whatever nodes were prescribed to a piece. For him, he was writing an homage to a beautiful superstructure that he earnestly believed in—enough to carry his work out of the unintentional (which can never be art) and into the world of composed literature.

Though accepting Walker's strange project weakens, no doubt, the power of the texts as we have until now read them, let us take comfort in the fact that the tradeoff is essentially the same one Walker made: to be always right at the cost of being always wrong.

Indiana University of Transylvania

Office of the President
February 19th, 2014

On the Passing of Ornet Paulein

Dear Students and Faculty,

It is with great sadness that I write to inform you all of the loss of a treasured member of our community. Ornet Paulein, beloved professor, writer, and colleague, passed away this morning surrounded by friends and family, of which he had many, with or without double counting. Those who knew him personally or through his work may find comfort in hearing that his final moments were spent revising, red pen in hand.

I first met Ornet ten years ago, at a luncheon for academics here in Oradea. He made strange company, as a habit, and no different on that night—I recall he sat near the piano most of the evening, facing its corner position rather than the social group in the center of the room. I asked him if he'd like to play something and looked at me with a look of such profound injury I thought I must have stepped on his tail. I introduced myself by way of apology; we talked for a while, exchanged information, and I excused myself to rejoin the group. It was in this way that I first became acquainted with Ornet's work.

To those of you who never read Ornet Paulein while he was alive, if his readership were as high as it ought to be, I would take this opportunity to shame you. As it stands, however, Ornet had few readers and even fewer adherents, so instead I will make use this tragic occasion to provide a brief overview of his work, that his name may find some posthumous sunshine in a new, younger, audience.

Ornet was not native to these once-contested western parts of the country, and as such never cared much for the particulars of history. As a child, he wrote fantastical, modified histories for his school reports, a practice that would have lost him his seat in the classroom if not for the intervention of a generous headmaster. Though it may be hard to believe now, in those days the lower college headmasters were for the most part men of letters, learned and passionate, in short, the kind of man likely to see promise in the inventions of young Ornet. Hoping to nurture what appeared to be a natural inclination towards fiction, the headmaster shifted the boy's readings away from history and into the world of literature.

The immersion in the warm currents of the canon did divert Ornet's writing, though not in the direction the headmaster had hoped. As they worked though countless volumes, masterwork after masterwork, it was not the fictional text that Ornet began to imitate, but the wrapping—forewords, afterwards, and introductions. On one occasion, Ornet once confided in me, he was discovered writing in fictitious footnotes into a prized edition of Eminescu's poetry. The headmaster was heartbroken, and asked Ornet why he had ruined the beautiful book. I imagine he couldn't understand the question.

Perhaps fearing further harm to his collection (or perhaps thinking his student had actually been destined for non-fiction since the beginning), the headmaster now set Ornet loose on his much less valuable collection of literary criticism. This, we can say with certainty, was where the good trouble began.

Ornet found in the critical works a voice and frame that lent itself to both imitation and invention. “A good essay about a good novel,” he would say, “if better than the novel, for it is both the good novel and a good essay. Once I understood that, I was able abandon every thought of writing straight fiction.”

The efficiency of the frame allowed him to produce a huge quantity of work straightaway. He wrote mostly pieces of false academic writing, in the manner of Borges or Landolfi—false in its object, but verily academic. Should you be interested in sampling Ornet’s oeuvre, I recommend the reader to *The New Ugliness outside Thebes (1962), The Fable of The Maid Revisited (1967), Grygor Damian’s Noose Collection (1967), The Knife Across All Things (1978),* or *A Hiker’s Guide into the Labyrinth under Mt. Etna (1990).* Any two would suffice.

Initially, he was well-received. The critics found the early work an intriguing *aperitif*, indicative of a writer with taste and creativity. “All that we await,” wrote *Vatra*, “is a piece of real fiction.” This criticism, common to all the reviews, only caused Ornet to retreat further into the safety of his false frame. Due to the critical layer around the central ideas of his pieces, he always has first shot. There can be no safer presentation of an idea than its mockery, for any anticipated criticism becomes agreement. As Ornet wrote in *We, the Cavalry, Speak: “*it is difficult, even the sure-handed reader will find, to shoot something that is already mostly holes.”

The critics, realizing that Ornet did not intend to drop the frame, all but forgot his work within a few years. Most took no offense at Ornet’s portrayal, in fact I know many who read his work to this day. They simply have little to add. His narrators take all joy away from a critical reading, indeed, his work comes almost pre-chewed for the reader. As such, it makes arts criticism out to be juvenile and flat, a ho-hum shrine to its object. I hope, dear students, you can appreciate the humor in this without stooping to agree. Not even Ornet, I don’t think, agreed with his own portrayal. He loved criticism; it was his muse and he read it constantly.

As a writer, though, it terrified him. He read it like a full-back watching rugby tape, making notes of new angles of attack as they appeared and carrying out the attacks on his own ideas—this was the way his pieces formed. Even decades after the critics had abandoned him—he was under almost no threat for the majority of his working years—he still continued in this way. Never, to my knowledge, did Ornet publish a single work of “naked” fiction; I suspect he could not stomach putting an idea out there without some protection, so serious was his love for his progeny. Only one such fragment survives, a brief errand-running scene he had titled *Pulling Corks.* It is unfinished twice over: we neither know the conclusion of the scene nor the intended frame. Likely, he would have preferred it burned than exposed in its raw form.

He refused to fully create that which he could not fully love. It was an integrity few among us will ever approach. I would ask that we remember Ornet Paulein within this anticipatory love, this *courageous* love, rather than the swinging self-immolation that it brought him to. A favorable remembrance, after all, is the least we owe to a good dead man.

Pulling Corks *[Fragment Found in the Files of Ornet Paulein]*

I left the party, as I had promised I would, to grab a few more bottles of wine. A shame, really, considering how hilarious Mr. and Mr. and Mrs. Borlogg were being (already, so few corks into the night); they had these three-handed comedy routines they would play out, truly ridiculous stuff, each taking turns acting the straight man—although, as their arrangement implies, they're probably of a more ambidextrous persuasion, ha-hah.

No need to lament though, for it was far from a banishment, this errand, and the air was rather nice anyhow, if a bit cold. The wine store, I was made to understand by our host, was more of a wine counter, installed inside a normal grocery store, but the selection was top-rate, perhaps the best in the city, at least as far as proximity goes. The only drawback, he explained, was that the square where the store lay was, unfortunately, enemy territory. Only inasmuch as it was currently controlled by enemy troops, but no matter, we ought not to let such things rule our lives, he said, and I agreed with him then as I do now.

So I came to a stone archway which fronted the alley leading into the square. It was a proper archway, that is to say truly *arched*, and not just two pillars with a bar across the top like a stone wicket, and the arch's shape set the profile for the entire alleyway.

Empty stalls ran along the right hand wall of the passageway. It was impossible to tell what wares they would have sold during the day, for they were really empty, even ransacked, and the immigrant vendors never decorated with descriptive pictures or words, only idle patterns I imagine to be motifs from their homeland.

A little ways before the end of the passageway I removed my shoes and carried them in the elegant way, together in the same hand. Walking softly around the final corner, I made as if looking for the wine store (or the wine-counter enclosing store) while I scanned the plaza for any officers. A few were standing in the far corner smoking something awful, or more likely burning something normal, and given how many benches and planters lay between us, not to mention how little I'd done wrong, I decided to proceed.

The door to the grocery wouldn't open entirely, so I had to enter sideways. The lights were brilliant white inside, and the paleness of the winter produce only spread the glare more. I wandered the aisles as my eyes adjusted—really, as my eyelids closed—until I came to the wine counter. It was a sort of alcove set into the left wall of the grocery store, with a cozy darkwood veneer. A selection of wines lined the back and right walls of the inlet, and more bottles sat out in low shelves on the floor. In the back left corner, behind a small divider, a man was sitting and smiling at me. I put my shoes back on and approached.

This may be the time, for it couldn't possibly come any later on, for me to admit my ignorance in matters of wine. A coddled ignorance, to be sure, and not one born of any disdain; it is simply that I keep such company that I can always delegate the choice to a more cultured party member than myself. (You'll allow me to flatter myself in the wake of my debasement.) Given the state of the party I'd just left though, there was really no one else who could go, certainly not the Borlogs, whose Cerberus presence was protecting the entire harmony of the party. No, there was no bitterness in my soul, only the shame of the philistine errand boy.

I'd hoped that the state wine monopoly and my host's assurance of a "top-rate selection" would clarify matters for me, but wandering, I mean *wandering*, through the wine alcove I felt

close to tears at the near complete similarity of the offerings. So many different names and years and origins, but all the same bottle with only minor modifications, a stretch to the neck on this one, dimples at the hips on that one. I began to dream of more daring and individual variations in the glasswork to calm myself down, at which point the man behind the divider asked me if there was any way he could help. I explained that I was looking for an impressive bottle or two at a reasonable price.

The clerk indicated a ladder I had missed on entering the store, inviting me to visit their extended selection. Now I walked around to the other side of the ladder, which meant coming back into the main area of the store, I marveled that I hadn't noticed it on my way in. Standing in the aisle outside of the alcove, I could see that the ladder ran up to a small cave directly above the lower area I'd just been in. It had walls of rough grey stone and very low ceiling. I took my shoes back off and climbed up the ladder.

Inside, it was pleasantly dark, at least compared to the main store, and the low ceiling scattered the light from the wall-torches in a useful way. A few of the same wooden wine cases as below were arranged on the floor here, to my dismay filled with the same government wines as before. There were a number of crates, many of them still spilling out ribbons of kinked packing material, and an even larger number of pallets, which were forming a sort of raised path off into the darkness at the back of the cave. As I went over to explore the tunnel, my stocking-feet found the reason for the pallets: a tremendous amount of sludge had pooled in the cave's sloping floor. I adjusted my path, moving instead along the pallets from dry ground, until […]