The Dread Beast Boredom

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It’s easy to think of life as a collection of moments. More than that, it’s comforting. A series of crests and troughs, patchwork highs and lows, temporary and powerful instantiations, visitations, of angels and demons: these are how we like to imagine our lives, because in this way we can lend them shape and significance. It is not so difficult, after all, to compose something of great import if one starts only with pieces of the greatest value, to be left with a divine and deep vision of the world if this vision is constructed piecemeal from cherry-picked, twinkling occasions of profundity and clarity.’

Unfortunately, this is no longer how the world works, if it ever was.

There are also, and have always been, creeping molds, ceaselessly crashing waves, three meals a day, stretches of empty silence, empty conversations, meaningless social pleasantries, feelings of others to be navigated, bathroom breaks to be had, flowers to be pruned, the rising and setting sun, wind and sun and snow and rain, things to be collected and sorted and looked after, and on and on and on forever. The modern age has added to these the burdens of ticking clocks, countless idle hours spent in gardens and cars and offices, rituals of cleanliness and preparation, forms and bills to be completed, household chores ever piling up, shopping trips, pets to be cared for, entertainment to be consumed, bureaucracy to be navigated, endless cycles of mindless practice at instruments and athletic games and academic endeavors, haircuts, hygiene, mirrors and making beds and phoning friends. These are what truly shape the passing of days, which suspend us, weightless, an all-surrounding ether, a nourishing and smothering amniotic medium within which we toil and struggle and discover and create. It is really only by the mastery and tacit understanding of this invisible and inescapable milieu of necessary functions that we are free to ascend, to strive, to leave our mark and reach those heights to which we all aspire, to create lives of substance and value that match the vision we have of what it means to be a human being.
Many forget this: David Foster Wallace did not. His final, unfinished masterwork, the posthumously published *The Pale King*, is a testament to it. It is both a dirge and a comically self-aware, triumphant, glorifying celebration of the oft-reviled American IRS worker who, amidst his proverbial-level scraping and toiling, his boulder-like persistence and commitment to greasing the hidden gears of modern life that things might function as they are designed, sits, ultimately “unborable,” beneath sodium-yellow lights in football-field sized offices in utter silence, flipping pages at his custom Tingle desk, closer to the unknowable, ineffable truths of the world than any who might think to lay claim to them (440). The tedium breeds revelation in the way recognizing one’s own mortality begets perspective, and it becomes apparent in Wallace’s explorations that not only do illustrious and powerful moments constitute only a fraction of what it is to exist, they actively obscure the beauty and the resonant depth of what it is to be a human amongst the quotidian minutiae that swirl endlessly about us all.

**The Past**

Time, though, has changed things: our conflict is new, and different from that of the past. Critic and essayist John Berger puts it thusly in his essay “Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible”:

> Until recently, history, all the accounts people gave of their lives, all proverbs, fables, parables, confronted the same thing: the everlasting, fearsome, and occasionally beautiful, struggle of living with Necessity, which is the enigma of existence—that which followed from the Creation, and which subsequently has always continued to sharpen the human spirit. Necessity produces both tragedy and comedy. It is what you kiss or bang your head against.

> Today, in the system’s spectacle, it exists no more. Consequently no experience is communicated. All that is left to share is the spectacle, the game that nobody plays and everybody can watch. As has never happened before, people have to try to place their own existence and their own pains single-handed in the vast arena of time and the universe. (12-13)

The truth of this fulmination is undeniable. The reverberations of the mythic, of the ancient stories and rituals that underpin all we know, those passed down through ages from the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Norse, do not sing of the small in the way Wallace wishes to; they are concerned always with the
big battles, and the obvious ones. They stave off darkness and try to apply meaning to a savage and cruel world. Humanity has, for most of its brief existence, after all, contended with disease, hunger, the unknowable and literal beasts of the forests and the night, death and destruction and pain and the ends of things, as these things were real, and they were everywhere; the quotidian has for most of history been defined by struggle, and thus capital-N Necessity; if anything, the banal was there as reassurance in rare moments of repose when life was safe and comfortable enough for reflection. Our ancestors didn’t have the time or the energy for the dithering that now occupies the human species, for the conflict that defines our collective existential angst and dread: but now that we, by a function of civil society, removed from life-affirming struggle, have introduced to our pantheon that dread beast boredom, with this long and fruitful legacy of man versus nature? Hercules did not grapple with malaise and purposeless depression, nor did Perseus when he slew Medusa, nor even Orpheus when he descended into Hades, and yet in the current age it is as if, by our own abstraction from the world, we have manufactured an entirely new host of antagonizing forces, or at least called them up from the obscure corners of being, and now must contend with the threat they represent.

**A Return to the Earth**

Perhaps one of the most intuitive solutions contemporary culture has put forth to deal with this problem has been to reconnect and reconvene with the natural, to forgo the unwelcome pressures and monsters of industrialized life and instead commune with the unsullied profundity that resides in the rocks, the trees, the fibers of the world that surrounds us. After all, this closeness has been the guiding light for our predecessors, has worked admirably for so many generations before us, and it makes a certain amount of sense to presume that a return to it might have benefits even now. Even Wallace admits there is a certain kind of power in nature: The Pale King’s exposition is built, after all, upon “electric sounds of insects at their business. Ale-colored sunshine and pale sky and whorls of cirrus so high they cast no shadow. Insects all business all the time. Quartz and chert and schist and chondrite iron scabs in granite. Very old land. Look around you. The horizon trembling, shapeless. We are all of us brothers” (5).
E. M. Forster, though, an author to whom the exploration of the primal and basic side of mankind was of the utmost interest, tackles this proposition directly in *A Passage to India*, a novel which, although ostensibly concerned with reconciling the highfalutin imperialism of the British Empire in the nation of India in the 20th century, grapples, in an earthy and direct way, with the power of the Earth and how we might interact with it: at its core it is an experiment in what results from the collision of the modern mind with the natural world. Indeed, one of its most conceptually important scenes involves an excursion of two English high society ladies, Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested (the former a world-weary and cynical older woman who hopes in the so-called primitive and foreign nation of India to find something of depth and significance that might redeem the world she knows, the latter a flighty and optimistic young thing who nevertheless hopes for the same, for a reprieve from her betrothal to a British official and all the stuffy implications of her married life), who, in a bid to enjoy what they refer to as “the real India” (a phrase undeniably pregnant given the current discourse and which, in their vocabulary, refers to the local, unpolluted life of the natives), descend into the confined blackness of the Marabar Caves, a series of smooth tunnels in the Indian foothills renowned for their remarkable acoustic and photic properties (22).

What they encounter, however, is complex and uncompromising: the echoic “ou-boum” that issues from the caves is powerful and sobering, surely, but perhaps not in the reassuring, transcendent way that the women had hoped it might be (163). Mrs. Moore later reflects on her encounter with that sound and comes to realize that she would rather be quit of life than deal with all that the Earth has to say in its manifold and reverberating voice about the affairs of man:

How indeed is it possible for one human being to be sorry for all the sadness that meets him on the face of the earth, for the pain that is endured not only by men, but by animals and plants, and perhaps by the stones? The soul is tired in a moment, and in fear of losing the little she does understand, she retreats to the permanent lines which habit or chance have dictated, and suffers there. (275)

Adela, on the other hand, a prototypically silly young girl lost in the throes of epic romanticism, blind in many meaningful ways to that skullduggery and ceaseless friction of her new Near Eastern home which plague Mrs. Moore and cause her death, is led to this particular circumstance by her innocent pathological need for spiritual vindication, for a way to make her passage to
India worth it, to step outside her stifling and stymieing upper-class existence, and so is more vulnerable: it is no surprise, then, when she is overwhelmed by the concentrated and focused reverberation of being, the pinpoint excitation of the minute and the unmagnificent in the Marabar Caves that is the ou-boom. The sound leads her to suffer a psychotic break in which she accuses Aziz, an Indian doctor and her guide, of attempted rape, an allegation which sparks cultural warfare and the drama that is the rest of the novel.

Perhaps, then, in Forster’s estimation of things, the Earth is not ready for our return, or at least we in our present state, swaddled as we are in modern convenience and cursed as we are by all the knowledge this swaddling affords us, are unready for the truths it might have to offer us. When finally at novel’s end Aziz and Fielding (the aforementioned Indian doctor and a British professor teaching in India), characters who might stand as personifications of enlightened and friendly Eastern and Western culture, try to join in friendship, to bridge the old world of man (with all its Necessity and all its danger) and the new world (with its dread beast boredom and its confining drudgery), Forster tells us that the Earth and the hills and the rivers say, “‘No, not yet,’ and the sky [says], ‘No, not there’” (362).

Indeed, in Rainer Maria Rilke’s view of things, the Earth is, although beautiful and all-consuming, intrinsically in its beauty and depth too much for the fragile human constitution that has become so removed from it, which has so differentiated itself from the rest of the animal kingdom and lost the gift for convening with it openly and honestly and purely:

We, though: never, not for a single day, do we have that pure space ahead of us into which flowers endlessly open. What we have is World and always World and never Nowhere-Without-Not: that pure unguarded element one breathes and knows endlessly and never craves. (47)

How, then, could we hope to connect with the purity we see in the Earth and in its other creatures if we’re lacking in the vocabulary of need and Necessity that allows simpler animals to derive its treasures? Perhaps it was foolhardy for Mrs. Moore and Ms. Quested to seek their justification in natural grandeur; perhaps it is not viable for man to try to hew from the rocks and convene with the sky and the river and Earth, for perhaps this is just an attempt at escape, to force open the encapsulating order that surrounds, and perhaps to do so, to try to so brazenly subvert the structures we are born into, enticing as the potential payoffs might be, is suicide. Although Forster holds
the natural as the ideal, he also realized in his way that its power is too absolute, is too different from the human, no matter how captivating it might be. Berger again, in “Opening the Gate”: “The result [of seeing through the interstices of the human order] is unsettling: there is more solitude, more pain, more dereliction. At the same time, there is an expectancy which I have not experienced since childhood, since I talked to dogs, listened to their secrets and kept them to myself” (6).

Artistic Transmutation

Virginia Woolf was no stranger to the burdens of polite modern society, high born and ensconced as she was in turn-of-the-century Britain with many responsibilities and social obligations. In To the Lighthouse, however, a story that appears to be about the day-to-day goings-on of a family on vacation but proves to be a treatise on the distillation of glory and life-affirming creation in the idle moments of repose and reflection—the tender and quiet moments on the beach playing ducks and drakes or lying supine on the grass in the warm sun, moments that prop up reality like the unseen flow of time—Woolf provides for us another powerful tool, art, that we might potentially use in the aid of breaking the dread beast boredom.

Mrs. Ramsay, the novel’s matriarch, who is a pervasive and ethereal force patterned after Woolf’s mother and perhaps the impetus behind the novel’s conception, is a conductor, an expert at bending the passage of the concrete world into an elastic and meaningful thing. Even as she clings uncompromisingly to domesticity and order, even as she organizes elaborate dinners with Boeuf en Daube laboriously prepared days in advance and admonishes all of her children and guests to behave cordially and prepare their hair and clothes and brooches just so, “she had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything, as she helped the soup, as if there was an eddy—there—and one could be in it, or one could be out of it, and she was out of it” (83). Mrs. Ramsay is simultaneously in the thick of things and removed, an observer, a shaper, a lender of energy and attention: she grants strength to her brilliant but flagging husband by reminding him of the import in small moments, fills the minds of her guests, even the erstwhile and unhappy Charles Tansley, with contemplation and self-examination, rallies her children about her in reverence and thanksgiving so that as they grow into the sober world of adulthood without her and dip their minds into the repetitive and endless nature of their world they might have her memory and the stately compunction and grace with which she carried herself at all times to
guide them. She lets no one forget the roots that keep them tethered to the 
world around their house in the Hebrides and to one another, and any sort 
of understanding (or then, Understanding) they gain is a function of this 
grounding, of this manipulation of elements, of this playing with the rules of 
the game, so to speak, that all involved might have a chance of achieving pur-
pose and depth instead of living their lives by rote.

The true embodiment of this ideal, though, is Lily Briscoe, a girlish 
woman with mawkish artistic inclinations who summers with the Ramsays 
and who bears the brunt of the novel’s thematic exploration. Indeed, she 
might in some ways personify Woolf herself: consider her crisis in the novel, 
wherein she tries, confusedly, often in vain, to manifest something of value 
on a canvas, to understand the secret of Mrs. Ramsay’s beauty in the language 
of paint and parallel lines and the way that matriarchal dignity unifies the 
sulking Charles Tansley, the obdurate Mr. Ramsay, the air-headed Paul 
Rayley and Minta Doyle, the way it transmogrifies their wayward proclivities 
and critical self-chastisements into concerted, beautiful scenic memories that 
reek of purpose and meaning, even and especially when they are boring and 
picayune. In this struggle we can see the parallel work of an author who must 
wrangle with the disparate and unrelated tendrils of energy and consequence 
and implacable daily progress that twist forever about us to create some 
erogenous, erotic release of purpose and form such that others might see and 
be enriched by the act of its making. Surely when done right it is a sight to 
behold, one that leaves the mind positively throbbing with manifold readings 
and interpretations, each one of value. Rilke, again in the Elegies, asks “Earth!
Invisible! / What, if not transformation, is your urgent charge?” and it would 
seem that for Lily and for Woolf transformation from experience into art, the 
reduction and capture of energy into the organizing shape of words or paint, 
is all (57).

Why might this kind of creation work where communion with the Earth 
might fail? In the nature of her pursuit, after all, Lily is the same as Adela 
Quested, a hopeful and helpless young woman lost in the gravity of her ado-
ration for an older woman and so too in the inescapable natural powers of the 
world around her, believing there to be forces beyond her and outside her 
which bend things to their will and which, if she can commune with them, 
might give meaning to her own life. The difference between the two, then, is 
that Lily is critically aware of the ways of the slow and uncompromising 
world. Instead of succumbing to the weight of her realization and losing her 
grip on the world as Adela did when she encountered hard truth (for Lily, 
instead of an “ou-boum,” this truth is the death of Mrs. Ramsay), Lily man-
ages to achieve some sense of higher meaning. It matters not that her paint-
ing “would be hung in the attics . . . ; it would be destroyed,” for at the end of her creating, she stands in a sort of defiance and resolute supremacy against being itself, against the implacable, creeping glacier of rules and man-
ers and moments which form her life at the vacation house but which all conspired, too, to give her just this moment (Woolf 208). She finally, but not without the aid of much time passing and the pervasive, far-reaching spirit of the illustrious Mrs. Ramsay reminding her always of the beauty in the inescapable, by way of resignation of ego and the handing over of her heart to the care of time itself, to the struggles and the myriad unsexy capitulations one must make to ensure domestic and daily harmony, manages to capture with her brush something worth keeping, some pearl of transcendence far different from the ones she originally sought to obtain, and much more valu-
able for it, and at the end decides, “I have had my vision” (209).

The New Hero for the New Mythic

This visionary act is the genius of Wallace, then; he has recognized this new world, has lived deep within the depths of strangling academic upper-
middle-class life, has seen the lineage of myth and Necessity we’ve turned our back on, but so too realizes that we cannot merely return to a state of nature, cannot merely digress from the rails of daily habit as they draw us inexorably onward, cannot dismount from the dread beast boredom without its violent and disastrous bucking. He knows too that the secret to transcendence lies to some degree in creation as Woolf shows us in *To the Lighthouse*, but that it cannot end there, for although Lily succeeds in her endeavor, we are also told of the difficulties in the novel’s second section where the natural world intrudes into the sphere of man:

[Touched by human penitence and all its toil, divine goodness had parted the curtain and displayed behind it, single, distinct, the hare erect; the wave falling; the boat rocking, which, did we deserve them, should be ours always. But alas, divine goodness, twitching the cord, draws the curtain; it does not please him; he covers his treasures in a drench of hail, and so breaks them, so confuses them that it seems impossible that their calm should ever return or that we should ever compose from their fragments a perfect whole or read in the littered pieces the clear words of truth. For our penitence deserves a glimpse only; our toil respite only. (127-28)

What is the answer, then? What is the prescribed course of action to handle boredom that Wallace dangles in front of us like a carrot, to take it all in hand
and force some new meaning into a world neutered of its cogency and force by repetition and banality and manners?

By way of an answer, we might look one final time at To the Lighthouse; specifically, at the character of Augustus Carmichael, a bearded man, opium-dulled, who floats like a ghost through the Ramsay’s summer home in a decidedly Zen-like, contemplative capacity. He is a watcher and scribbler of poems, and so in some ways akin to Lily in her need to be creative. But he is also immune to her fears, to the quailing she feels at the enormity of things, seemingly content to immerse himself in each and every sliding second that he might wring from them some verse or just sit contented on the grass outside the house. True, Woolf never grants us access to his thoughts as she does with other characters, and we see him always only through the eyes of someone else, but through this lens we come to understand him as naturally predisposed to the fruitful nature of acquiescence, as it were, as imbued with quasi-divine potential to supersede the boundaries of his devotion to drudgery, and then so to stand as a shining example of peace and transcendence—happy and confident in the passage of time and in the fiddling of the everyday. He has perhaps a passing antipathy for Mrs. Ramsay, for the fervor of her reorganization and the desperation of her creation, but is nevertheless in harmony with it all, a new sort of heroic figure for a new mythic landscape.

“Heroism,” then—perhaps that’s the answer. A new, particular type of heroism that’s about outlasting and suffering and supporting to create. In The Pale King, everyday life is clearly painted as villainous, or, at the very least, as an obstacle to be overcome, a challenge to be risen to, to be smote and cast down and brought to heel much as the monsters of old myth; only now the heroic virtues are different than they once were. Take Wallace’s own words:

[An economics professor to his accounting students on the last day of his class:] This may be the first time you’ve heard the truth put plainly, starkly. Effacement. Sacrifice. Service. To give oneself to the care of others’ money—this is effacement, perdurance, sacrifice, honor, doughtiness, valor. Hear this or not, as you will. Learn it now, or later—the world has time. Routine, repetition, tedium, monotony, ephemeracy, inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, ennui—these are the true hero’s enemies, and make no mistake, they are fearsome indeed. For they are real.

(233)

Every character in The Pale King is, in some way or another, an example of this new heroic ideal. Each is an outwardly unremarkable IRS worker whose life is related in crushing, extensive detail, all his past foibles and failures and the underwhelming experiences related to the reader, so we realize just how
unremarkable he is. Yet each has some bizarre secret power or curse. Shane Drinion, a near-autistic savant of contemplation who is capable of preternatural levitation in moments of extreme fixation and focus, such that “one night someone comes into the office and sees Drinion floating upside down over his desk with his eyes glued to a complex [tax] return” (487). Leonard Stecyk, who is so doggedly, supernaturally kind and optimistic that his grade school principal “fantasizes about sinking a meat hook into [his] bright-eyed little face and dragging the boy face-down behind his Volkswagen Beetle over the rough new streets of suburban Grand Rapids” (34). Claude Sylvanshine, whose whimsical last name refers to an optical illusion wherein the wax that exists on the leaves of certain types of trees reflects light in the heat of summer so that to an observer they seemed white and covered in snow, beautiful and impossible and contrary, and who is a “fact psychic,” a person to whom data of all sorts (“That the 1938 featherweight WBA champ had mild scoliosis in the region T10-12,” “The average molecular weight of peat,” “the name of his [fourth grade] homeroom teacher’s husband’s first love’s childhood cat who’d lost one side’s whiskers in a mishap near the coal stove in Ashtabula OH,” and so on) come randomly and unbidden and to very little usable effect (121-22).

Each is beset by some strange malady, given to unfathomable pressures and fears of shortcoming for their strangeness on top of the (paradoxically) already crushing normalcy of their lives, and yet each stands confident, resolute, “unborable” in the face of it all, and each, even as a sort of challenge to reality itself, decides to join the IRS and hunker down in the trenches of the battle against mind-numbing, fatally boring facts, the unyielding progression of day after day, return after return, moment after interminable moment, such that he can show the world there is a new way out, a new way to saddle the dread beast boredom and make it work for humanity, a way to best the inky and insidious malaise that waits in every room and empty alleyway and train car, and in this way transmute it. This new hero’s struggle is not only for the creation of something worth having, not only for the glorifying and remembrance of the power of the Earth, but even for sanity and purpose in a world of incoherence and informational chaos. This is selflessness in the deepest sense of the word, this is the new standard of striving, this is the new mechanism humanity needs, his new Hercules, despite the fact that even at novel’s end each is gray and tight-lipped and suffers under the weight of the world.
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