

Nail Chiodo

*Lucus Feroniae*

*The Woods of Feronia. Part One.*  
*2000-2006: For Tove.*

LE MILIEU

© 2009 by Nail Chiodo  
All Rights Reserved

## Prologue

I was right to suspect it might not take me long to discover a new, healing measure of calm upon my retirement to this outpost north of the city. Over this last stretch of planing farmland west of the Tiber before the foot of Soratte there grew, in ancient times, a wood sacred to a goddess who on the sick took pity; the Muses dwelt on the small yet ominous mountain that reveals its awesome profile as one moves slowly around it; while in the valley below, the strong brown river god attended lazily, as he still does today, to its irrigation. Now that I abide by them, these spirits millenarian no longer shun me as they always, instead, had done (to my imperfect regret) when I used to hurry by on the highway or first came here as a tourist, hoping in a couple of days to wistfully grasp them like flies in my fist. My past ignorance, they seem somehow inclined to forgive, demanding as penance for it only a personal narrative of the events that led me finally to quit the metropolis. To this humble task I now set my even humbler pen in the hope that my version may be worthy of the attention of at least one other human being on the planet.

## Canto I

Already two scores ago, a great many of my peers  
across the godless Atlantic, while still in their formative years  
felt spurred to abandon city or suburb and to return to the land  
in search of a different manner of life, inspired  
by an instinctive distaste for the waste that transpired  
from the pores of a body politic prey to consumption.  
Those “goddam, muthafuckin, hippie shits”  
(as local rednecks were wont to call the floral kids)  
were the first to feel the heat from a process of combustion  
that, precisely in those years, had reached a critical threshold:  
more energy was by then being produced bought and sold  
to fuel the world’s expanding industrial system  
than was photosynthesized by the plants of the earth  
and the waters. Man had outweighed the Sun in his worth.

It was the beginning of a very particular end.  
In the wake of that epochal shifting of scales,  
the spoliation of the globe has progressed in full sail,  
or perhaps one should rather say at full steam;  
and even more tangible, by my estimation,  
than the overdoses of ultraviolet radiation  
that cut through the thinned air and find us at the beach  
is the knowledge or skin feeling, as you prefer,  
that also within our society there grows a desert,  
more arid yet than those that encroach from the tropics.  
But I shall not risk adding insult to injury in this poem  
or knocking down a door that is already wide open

by trying to convince anyone of anything on this topic:  
“Humanity in general will meet the fate it deserves.”<sup>1</sup>

One still remains astonished, it needs be observed,  
that one’s own case but confirms the general rule:  
what a most extraordinary period of history to be living in,  
with a surprise, *man-made* apocalypse already in full swing  
as none of our God-fearing forefathers, except maybe Malthus,  
had even remotely imagined were humanly possible!  
Not exactly the sort of story it is at all probable  
that one shall tell to one’s grandchildren someday  
(“When I was your age, the world had just begun  
to go down the drain....”), nor a revelation  
to be easily shared with one’s contemporaries  
(“Layees and bent men, bow-wow,  
thank you, you can go home now....”).

Because—it practically goes without saying—  
if it were not quite so difficult for us to communicate,  
we would not be in such straits in the first place.  
And this difficulty, too, is of our own making,  
albeit not the result of any conscious choice  
as of a confusion of the different voices  
that may speak to an individual but not to a nation,  
to a community but not to the world:  
what say the Partitions of Poland to a pretty girl?  
What the iniquity of overpopulation?

Being the Beasts that we are, however,  
it is perhaps hardly a wonder  
if the vast majority of us, at least,  
have fallen prey to such equivocation:  
all that was at the origins of human creation—  
our ape-natural and cave-cultural ascendancies,  
the primordial terror that humbled the giants,

---

<sup>1</sup> Albert Einstein

the overwhelming prerogatives of families and clans,  
the primeval vow of the propertied to curtail their servants—  
all are still with us alongside the yearning for freedom;  
while the new type of colossus which we have become  
can no more be humbled than an army of ants  
or a mould grafted onto a half-loaf of bread.

## Canto II

Humanity and Nature have come to loggerheads  
and neither will be quite the same ever again.  
With hindsight, it is plain that both have “only kidded”  
until now, since even the briefest foresight bids us  
soon to expect a whole series of events Promethean,  
affecting the deepest traits of the race and its environment.  
How far away, indeed, are we from the requirement  
(for a more “cost-efficient” form of Earthly survival)  
of a grand genetic fusion between animal  
and vegetable, some sort of “little green man”  
made in the laboratory, in a prodigious vial—  
though, for ethical purposes, at first circumspectly—  
a chimera able to change light directly  
into something that, to itself, is partly edible?  
If Mohammed will not go to Mars,  
shall Mars not come to Mohammed?  
Would not a verdant pope be more credible  
when calling for peace from the window-sill?  
And if the corolla be Jewish, Goy at most the pistil,  
will God not preserve His chosen cabbage?  
It behooves not one who is frockless  
to pry into other people’s pockets  
and say where lies their advantage:  
that is Heaven’s part; our part  
to do those two things at once that enable Art  
to resist the tyranny of Nature, yet not succumb to Man’s—

though no one has ever made any *money*  
at the festival, everyone has always  
given generously of their talent.

That the pen is mightier than the sword  
has never been doubted by this author,  
although he has yet to find the right words  
to describe the mincemeat he would gladly have made  
of all those in his life who willfully got in the way  
(blades of *grass*, rather, seeming more suited to turds).  
But the rivers of ink that have flowed from our quills  
have not kept an ocean of blood from being spilled  
and a profession of modesty is no doubt in order:  
we came, we saw, we tried to conquer  
with all of our artistry the hearts of others;  
the hope was immense, the result mediocre.  
The sense of failure that has thus been our due  
comes as no surprise, finally, to those of us who  
have suffered intelligence to bow down to stupidity,  
not for a want of ability, or better arguments,  
or even of the chance to display them in parliament,  
but simply in deference to its sheer infinity.

When caught in the midst of a swarm of locusts,  
one should not try to bring them too sharply into focus  
lest one leafily drop into a state of hypnosis  
that razes the spirit more than they do the crops.  
The same holds true as regards human props,  
though even among those who know this  
there is disagreement about them as such:  
what to one has become like a leg remains a crutch  
to another. Some claim there are none at all,  
while others maintain there is nothing but;  
between these extremes lies the actual rut  
in which one tries to plan one's footfalls

with blinders on to shut out the horror.

One may rightly wonder what kind of honor  
there could possibly be in so grim a tale.  
That one has lived to tell it seems irrelevant  
by its very account; even an elephant's  
memory would only lead back to this vale,  
however jungley and riddled be the way round.  
Ah, for a single clean piece to this world's dying ground!

The disordering of the senses, after it has lived  
(if it has lived) its systematic stage,  
becomes a semi-automatic quotidian rage  
that tends more towards the tan than to the livid.  
An inner ear attentive to the littlest thought  
remains all that is needed, more often than not,  
to immediately spot the dubious claim  
which would intrude from the hell of desire,  
to cast it back into the earthly mire  
where it can be certain to find heaven in pain.

The true artist may enjoy some peace of mind, therefore,  
comforted not least by an anthropological metaphor:  
no human community has ever tried to hold more  
than about *five-hundred* members and not split in two.<sup>2</sup>  
Here is a number that one might relate to  
even if one is not listed in *Fortune* or *Forbes*,  
an upper limit to the actual number of persons  
with whom one could hope to share the same version,  
*pace* the “twenty-thousand close friends” of President Ford.  
This glass ceiling, neither too low nor too tall,  
may, when the story is finished, be practically all  
that remains of infrangible to ward off the hordes  
from the inner sanctum of our personal lives.  
Without pleading misanthropy or telling a lie,

---

<sup>2</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss

one may set down terms and plant a few stakes  
in honor of that other ancient Roman divinity—  
the god Terminus, guardian of all true affinity—  
to mark off the borders of our private estate  
in the spirit, of a more proper property  
protected against the disarming robbery  
of meaning that proceeds unarrested at large.

## Canto III

I shall therefore revert to the personal and the small  
and concentrate my attention only as far as the wall  
that separates my circle of intimates from others too ajar,  
too numerous, or too exclusive to be counted amongst us;  
I will do so starting from what one might call the “historic nucleus”  
of my closest friends and let the compass reach out from there.

To cherish those nearest to one is a natural impulse—  
call it a passion, esprit-de-corps, or just instinctive pull—  
that not only gentlemen but also scoundrels do share:  
which may be one reason why Christ urged all those who can  
to go a step further and to try to understand,  
to bear with, and even to love them that inspire revulsion  
*prima facie*—a formidable imaginative task  
tantamount to the ripping off of the mask  
of the ego, the challenging of all convenient assumption,  
the begging to be torn asunder by the Furies...  
not exactly your every schlemiel’s cup of tea.

Yet there are some whom the Fates have empowered  
to sense the primacy and urgency of such a proceeding,  
not only for themselves, but also for our whole species’ being:  
that it still might be said that we are not cowards  
before God as a race, though many continue to be craven,  
pusillanimous, and even dastardly towards their fellow man.

So penitential a destiny can become sealed  
only after the “shades of the prison walls” have closed shut  
around the fully grown boy, not when his pluck

is still adolescent and the rich penumbras of life's appeal are but juvenescent. Yet it is at that earlier time—when the learning to read and to write on the fly and how to articulate individual opinions coincides with the pubescent's natural need to rebel against their parents and/or other controllers, helps them to voice their aspirations despite all constriction—that young persons' first vital, critical friendships are born.

My own experience falls a little outside of the norm in this respect, as I sprang from a relatively enlightened couple, who had made life even easier for me by divorcing, so that I could have more or less my own way in things without offending anyone or causing much trouble. Also in deviance I was somewhat precocious, though to my mind there had been nothing atrocious in fixing a mirror to the top of my shoe and carrying out a detailed periscopy beneath a girl's skirt, even if it got me failed in conduct while at elementary school. As far as rebellion is concerned, I have been convinced that the sooner it is enacted the better ever since I took a good look at my first-grade class picture: everyone in it except the hyperactive, most unruly kid—Steven I believe his name was—but including Mrs. So-and-so, our teacher, cuts a rather dull figure; Steven, instead, appears illumined by some vastly superior knowledge, his head at the center of the last row like a meteor beaming with a smile about to come down on us all. What happened to him in the later course of his life, I don't know; that it may have ended in strife seems somehow probable, as sure as shooting stars fall; but, as far as I can distinguish, there is no spark of genius that does not have his glow.

My first friends and I entered our teens in the mid-sixties, at a time when rebellion was very much in the air amongst those ten years older than us, who had been scared numb by the test-explosions of nukes on TV, the eeriness of the McCarthy hearings, the stomach-turning footage of concentration camps and of the ever-burning desert wastelands of Hiroshima and Nagasaki when they were coming of age and we were still toddlers. We, too, had perceived some of the same sodden stuff on the tube but, being much younger, were more lucky as far as the programming went, more in sync with the new plethora of slapstick and of comedies for children. We grew up on the whole formed by the sway of tongue-in-cheek portrayals of middle-class life, with hardly any wherewithal about the polemics that had surrounded, say, rock-and-roll; by the time we reached high school we were prone to believe ourselves bound to triumph by candor alone, and everything around us seemed to confirm it.

Aristotle says that young persons fool themselves when they deem friendship not to be based upon selfish instinct, that in reality every relationship worthy of such a noble appellative is also an investment made to further concrete exchanges of mutual interest. I am quite ready to underwrite what old *Iipse* himself *dixit* in about as many words, as also my bosom buddies and myself in those halcyon days were not fudging around when we elected each other as the greatest wealth we could possibly want amidst the general scramble for treasure. All in our little “clique” had discovered the truest pleasure in the confirmation we afforded one another of the suspicion that had matured in each of us singly throughout the later years of our childhood, and in the “cross-fertilizations” we were

able to enact for the enrichment of the others' visions.

Despite our somewhat different backgrounds we had converged like so many hounds upon the same univocal conclusion: a more just world would have had to be meritocratic, what with most peers and adults being as *thick* as they were, like so many clots and occlusions to be preventively bypassed in society. The educational system recognized the propriety of desert as a criterion for advancement and, in this sense, appeared at least well-intentioned; yet it offered no follow-up in the same direction, preferring to prospect material enhancement to those who lagged behind intellectually. That this was a fatal flaw which eventually would precipitate the world's descent into hell was quite beyond the scope of our imagination, as of most everyone else's at the time in question: the "limits to development" were nice and well, but there was fuck-all one could do to avoid them; while nothing in the world waxed more annoying or wearing of the spirit than the sanctimonious bellowing of fatted calves to the slaughter.

Tom, Fred, Kerry, and Scott were—  
I say this at the risk of sounding odious to someone who may never have had such a feeling— comrades who gave my adult life a reason for being beyond the confines of what is only better than nothing. Thanks to them I discovered the practical meaning of true nobility of character; of leaving the dumb, pedestrian trudge for the cutting-edge, tightrope dance of symbolic-logical thought; of the sublime supra-sexual

in women; of an alerted social responsibility.  
Paltry things! Nothing more (or less) than the manifestation  
of what may be termed the divine in Man without exaggeration,  
the sodium chloride of all earthy sensibility.

## Canto IV

Though products of our country and of our generation,  
in the search for identities and lasting vocations  
we five Midwesterners commerced in wares  
of all kinds of different origins and implications:  
Tom did his ecstatic Aretha Franklin imitations,  
and of Earl “the Pearl” Monroe twisting in the air;  
Fred took me through the steps of Gödel’s Theorem,  
became the nation’s proto-hacker *ante litteram*;  
Kerry brooded through the plays of Harold Pinter,  
one of the first persons west of the Mississippi  
to have heard of him; while Scott, rather more simply,  
invoked Martin Luther King and Gandhi to kill the winter.

I counted myself an American then and will continue  
to do so as long as I live, even if it would be more true  
to describe me as an odd hybrid with solid roots  
both in Europe and in the States, who will spare the reader  
the tedious account of his commuting across the seas.  
Not being one of those animals who only eats roots  
shoots and leaves (though there be many of those too  
on both continents), old-world refinements proved  
effective in gaining me the esteem of my pals.  
There is an epigram I had discovered in Proust  
that boosted my credit as a wit in the group  
and still, to this very day, has me baffled:  
“To hope without hope, which would be wise, is impossible.”—  
ominous words, as might have come straight from the Sybil

and point to the tragic sense of the stories  
of the likes of us with no choice but to follow  
our tastes in a world ever harder to swallow.

Back in those years, however, the future looked rosy  
compared to today. Gandhi, Hammarskjöld (whose *Markings*  
had deeply scored me), JFK—all had vanished darkly;  
and the reverend King with Robert Kennedy one famous spring  
followed suit; but Allende had not even been elected yet,  
nor had the pope stood on the balcony alongside Pinochet.  
Indeed, what I have always found truly troubling  
are not so much the blows dealt to due process *per se*,  
as the punctually mushy, circumstantial reactions of persons  
of so-called learning to the most dire watersheds:  
veritable *non sequiturs* that the schizoid media  
mirror but originate in the basic schizo-*phrenia*  
of the middle-class, trapped in between the quick and the dead.

At this point, I wish I could say “But I digress!”  
and go off on an actual tangent, leave unaddressed  
the tricky question of socio-cultural extraction.  
For we ourselves were all middle-class kids,  
subject to the same conflicts of interest and victims  
of the same divided conscience as the next man;  
so how to explain the origin of the specificities  
that formed the basis of our elected affinities  
without referring to those very parents  
whom we were supposed to be rebelling against  
but who, in reality, had just begun to exert their influence  
*through* us, via our own behavioral patterns?

Probably the deepest parentally-induced trait  
that we all had in common was a disdain  
for social climbing: a pride of spirit  
that prevented us from aspiring to being any richer  
in material terms or socially more in the picture

than we already were; and, of course, strongly limited the likelihood we should ever become “winners”. In truth, we had always had at our fingertips everything that we really needed; nor were our mothers and fathers determined to make us into vicarious successes only for the sake of some old fear or resentment of theirs, with deeds whose consequences none could predict. The freedom they fostered was authentic and, therefore, necessarily structured—moral integrity, intellectual honesty, and a fundamentally inclusive bonhomie surged as triple pillars of our liberal culture.

To stand by these qualities amounts to putting one’s own interest and that of others on near-equal footing, a graceful stance which has belonged both to enduring empires and to the smallest tight-knit sodality. That we mistook such ingenuousness for normality speaks thus not only of the more than a few things we had yet to learn, but also of an ancient wisdom that flowed unperturbed in the vein, of the broader framework of civilization within which we would all meet our fate.

Evening has again fallen in this country place where Hannibal’s elephants once stationed. My book tells that if his cause had not been disparaged by factious oligarchs back at his own Carthage, he could have taken Rome without any problem. It just shows to go you, don’t it, how silly oligarchs will be? And how puerile the vanity of the society that comes to depend on them.

## Canto V

More than any other thing, it is our *priorities* that served us rightly, helped to satisfy—or at least to assuage—a great many yearnings. There is little that I know in detail about the varied lives of the others in my quintet since the time of our scattering, when after high school we hit the road and careered down separate paths: the only experience I can go through the math of point by point is my own; but on the basis of what I do know from or about them, I can tell that all have used their fancy's scimitar well to preserve some semblance of peace in the oasis.

Tom has refused all hypocritic oath and, like a true captain of the only same boat that everyone is on, has instead become a doctor specialized in the health care of the working. He is married to a woman of many noteworthy achievements... yet, rather than play proctor to him, I shall quote from the e-mail he wrote me not long ago: “Hi Luigi, yes was this ever a surprise! So very nice to hear from you! As you probably surmised from the web site, my life has been almost anything but ‘artsy’. My wife of eleven-plus years, Bonnie, is ten years older than me, was in Ghana in the second Peace Corps group ever, went to Oberlin to become a serious piano/violin player (and ended up a chemistry major), taught at Malcolm X

in Chicago in the late sixties, got a PhD in ‘Industrial Engineering’ (her dissertation was on the politics of abortion—she used to be a member of ‘Jane’, a collective of women who performed illegal abortions without a physician before Roe versus Wade), taught at Georgia Tech and the University of Michigan, did lots of international consulting on women’s health issues, and is now a serious weaver (and Mom). We have two adopted daughters

(we were in the birthing room both times), Lucy age ten and Lily age four:

a couple of high-energy, forceful personalities.

Besides work, almost all the fabric of my life revolves around them.

I work too hard but do a wide variety of often interesting things and, sometimes, seem to make a real difference.

Back problems of uncertain diagnosis since the late seventies—actually doing better than ever with this and not much interference with lifestyle and activities. We were in South Africa for a sabbatical year in ’93-’94

and return there for another year in July:

incredibly beautiful, complex, fascinating place.

So happens last week I was in NYC and saw Kerry

for the first time in twelve years—she’s as eccentric and focused on her own path and delightful as ever—

gave up being an architect, has been working almost full time on a complex art project related to the phenomenology of the origins of perspective, its relationship to Christian prayer and to the conceptualization of the world—she had a showing in St. Louis last year. The others you mention

I’ve had no contact with.... Do you know how to contact Fred currently? Hugs and ciao, Tom”.

Yes, that is indeed the voice of my cherished Tom, whom I can still see as if he were before me in the act—as simple and necessary as it was uncommon

in the readiness with which it was done—  
of rising from where he was sitting in order to go  
sit down next to someone who wanted consoling.

Fred, too, was quick, but more inclined to stroke  
the wrong way the hair of whoever spoke  
in clichés, automatic babble, and ready-made formulas  
from under an institutional umbrella,  
from behind a desk or atop a pulpit.  
It is unlikely that he had read much by Plato,  
yet the Socratic method was for him second nature  
and, in no time at all, the culprits  
could be found gagging with a foot  
in their mouth that they themselves had put.  
More than once suspended from school and oft dismissed  
from certain classrooms, whenever shown to the door  
my fast friend never failed to crawl out on all fours.

He left high school before having quite finished  
and did not go to the most renowned university:  
it came to him, quite conversely,  
and the freshman both studied and taught mathematics  
there that same year. I have it from a reliable source  
that the richest man in the world took his course  
and that it helped him to become more pragmatic.

The so-named educational method and philosophy  
that had come into being in those same lofty  
halls exactly one hundred years earlier,  
first enounced by Charles Sanders Peirce and then duly  
expanded upon and divulged by John Dewey  
(who died, incidentally, the same year  
in which Fred was born), may well have lived  
its apotheosis in that down-to-earth class of his.  
The lot of the nation's upwardly-mobile reserves  
stormed shortly thereafter the ivory ramparts

of higher learning (it was the time those serial upstarts known as “Yuppies” first made their sad presence observed); and authentic pragmatists, who always have the greater picture on their flesh-and-blood mind as a permanent fixture, were inevitably destined—just like Peirce himself generations earlier—to withdraw from the very stage they had helped to set.

Society can only ever pay but lip service to the debt that it owes to the most daring imaginations: for it takes not only brains but also a heart to understand that the most audacious mind-sets achieved by Man require not just creativity but also the courage to use it. All those who really have neither, or perhaps one but not the other, must make the best of what they *have* got and band up so as to try to protect their allotted bits. Amongst them there may always be some who are still able to appreciate at least one (or the other) of those outstanding qualities, but never once anyone who can comprehend both. Inexorably lost upon those who are loath to admit to a broader scenario, audacity thus runs into society’s wall of defenses; if Fortune does not entirely omit to attend to its responsibility in the inevitable crash of the designated victims, the latter can usually hope to come out of it with a few broken bones, a solitary existence, and a shortage of cash: many a genial life’s tale in a single paragraph.

One should hardly speak in terms of last laughs where such unhappy (when not downright tragic) turns of fate are concerned, but there remains the uncanny whole other side of the story that, one can be charmed to imagine, might simply condemn as if by magic all hypocrites to forever wash dishes in heaven.

I advance this in lieu of other hypotheses more leaden,  
which posit instead afterlives of psycho-physical torment  
or—what is utterly inconceivable—a nothing  
devoid of all meaning, like turkey without gravy or stuffing,  
a state undistinguishable from never having been born.  
Everything is possible, of course, but my own impression  
is that human experience *does* assume superhuman dimensions  
wherein the scullery might well correspond to high office.

I shall return upon this subject later,  
when the time comes to explore the great crater—  
or embarrassing, pustulant stumbling block  
on the plain face of our so-called mass culture—  
represented by the furuncular feature-  
length film that Fred and I made together,  
along with three more of my maverick brothers,  
and which goes by the title of “The Insignificant Other”.  
For the moment, I must abide by the taut tether  
of our greater community and go on to recount  
also a little of what Kerry and Scott are about.

## Canto VI

Of our golden section's original pentacle  
which I am here sketching, only one vertex, *id est* Scott,  
has produced offspring—a fact even more odd  
if one considers that he alone is of the same gender  
and mind when it comes to sexual preference.  
We all have had for sex a deep reverence,  
our facial wrinkles and puckers will attest to it;  
and, as is no doubt only normal, we all  
would also have loved to have kids one could call  
one's own in the biological sense, fate permitting—  
but solely as a tribute to the rectilinear, as it were,  
not out of even the remotest bias against curves.  
The founding of a nuclear family seemed a worthy ambition,  
yet to adopt children was deemed an equally perfect,  
if perhaps more roundabout, way to effect it;  
plus, it had the honorable distinction  
of not contributing to the further augmentation  
of an already hypertrophic world population  
and, at the same time, of providing a home  
to those who might not otherwise have one.

Tom, as we have seen, can claim to have done  
what our theory prescribed (and to have shown  
it to be entirely valid, one might add).  
But fate forbade even him to become a dad  
while still in the fullness of his prime,  
to take the straight path towards reproduction,

yielding to the concerted efforts at abduction  
of mother nature and madam society combined.  
I think one might venture to say we grew certain  
that to possess even but half our genes would be a burden  
on the par with the next man's or woman's lot;  
and that events concurred to prevent us from occasioning  
our reincarnation or compiling original sins—  
all of us except that walking experiment called Scott.

To him I instead owe the perduring sensation—  
which first set in when, by way of recreation,  
we drove out together to remote shopping malls  
in the burbs, for to hold late-night conviviums  
over a sandwich and beer, a pack of smokes and one of gum—  
that everything can be explained if it is liable  
to explanation, that there exists a universal  
order, not only to things but also to words,  
in which even the social and “literary” criticism  
of two neophytes such as us occupied a central spot.  
It was a sensation that sprang out of thought  
which had struck and sustained a prose rhythm  
for the first time in conversation, analogous  
to the blissful feeling of riding the dragon  
that is experienced whenever the natural realm  
responds to one's tottering advances towards it  
by propelling one forward as if on wings,  
whether as an athlete, skipper at the helm,  
artist, scientist, philosopher, animal-driven plougher  
of the land or of the body of a lover.

Neither of us had been properly wounded yet,  
and each rested his hopes never to be so  
on the highest ideal he could reach by a bold  
leap of the imagination. Scott thus placed his bet  
that society would be induced to disown

all political incorrectness also thanks to his own  
indefatigable efforts to promote therapy groups,  
tutoring, counseling, and psychoanalysis.  
I felt flattered to be a close pal of his,  
such dedication to others seemed to me a scoop  
worthy of the highest journalism, if not of literature:  
I, too, planned to devour my world in miniature  
but, having yet to be stung by the scorpion  
of politics, still lived entirely in the republic  
of ideas, where one could be thrust into the thick  
of battle while playing scales on an accordion.

The greater part of my life has been spent  
keeping tabs on all sorts of ugly conceits that entered  
my mind of their own accord, without there being anything  
I could do about the vile infiltrations except  
to take note of them with distaste and move on ahead.  
Everyday there were new ones, recrudescences notwithstanding,  
which I classified according to type: cowardly, evil, absurd—  
had they slipped by me unnoticed, I would have become a cur  
of uncommon proportions without realizing it.  
As it was, instead, I turned into an unwitting expert  
in the most recondite forms of vice on this Earth,  
to the extent—is there any reason to hide it?—  
of deeming the planet should be metaphysically a safer place  
once I were departed: another curious member of the race,  
you might say, who would have done better to be a plumber.

As I recall, Scott's insistence on the primary importance  
of admitting certain terms in lieu of others into our parlance  
(so as not to offend the sensibilities of a growing number  
of ethnic and social groups that advanced claims on the demotic)  
prompted not a few unwanted and unwarranted demonic  
parodies to be enacted on the stage of my conscience.  
In all fairness to my subconscious, however,

it must be said that they were fair weather  
compared to the rabid version of common sense  
promulgated by some of those inquisitorial linguists.  
For how to imagine a more tense and constrictive  
environment than that circumscribed by the sphincters  
of someone who conceives of “significant other”  
as an improvement upon “darling”, or “love”,  
or any of the numberless names for him or for her  
with which, in a tongue known as English, forty  
generations of passionate speakers have invoked their abhorred  
cell-mate or beloved prison-keeper? There is nothing for it:  
the sensual and emotive deprivation of post-industrial  
Man is as pathetic and sad as it is ineluctable;  
lucky are they who still can enjoy a significant shit.

Were I to lie down now on Scott the analyst’s couch  
and be enjoined to open my heart and to let it all out,  
to resume our old conversation where it got left off  
almost four decades ago, at the start of our life as adults,  
my impulse would be to try to sum up the results  
of my labors since then, to distil the slough of despond  
into whose tricky depths I have been drawn *pari passu*  
with the ebbing of hope that the world could improve.  
“The compassionate feeling that has led you to defend  
those who are oppressed”, I would tell him, “is one  
and the same as that kindled in me by traditional wisdom.  
To darn our fraying ties with the latter has hence  
been for me—and not only for me—a paramount duty,  
although I—we—could never have imagined how few  
and far between the so-called literate men and women  
would finally be who are not a part of the problem.  
As for the rest, I can neither condemn nor absolve them;  
it is a pity, however, that more people read not more poems,  
starting from the Bible, yet not disdaining yours truly.

“I should be the first person to ridicule me  
for citing my own work and the seminal myths  
and metaphors of Western literature in the same breath,  
had I not a strange tale to get off my chest  
which I would now tell and pray you to bear with....”

## Canto VII

“... The animal I would most liken myself to is the sponge,  
for whatever else I may or may not have done  
in my day, I did suck-up every last drop  
of what appeared to be knowledge that floated my way.  
Philosophy thus grabbed and drew me in its sway,  
where portentous currents of old and new thought  
boldly carried me to and fro about the library.  
Except for proctology, which never quite did it for me,  
I read-up on every curious subject that I came across  
with an eye to filling-in the most serious lacunae  
in my education, the blind-spots in my world view.  
The more pieces I fit in, however, the more I was at a loss  
to believe how frightfully ignorant one can easily be,  
especially if one knows *how*, but not *what*, to actually read.

“I have always felt akin to the underdog, and poetry,  
of all forms literary, is the most misapprehended:  
to be acquainted with it, it seems one must have attended  
a jesuitic academy or fallen-in with some coterie  
of initiates, for the good words do not lend themselves  
to being learnt by rote, between commanding bells;  
to penetrate a great poem is to enter a domain  
from which one emerges more true to oneself in the end.  
Moreover, poetry keeps alive the proclaiming voice even when  
it might seem there could be nothing left to proclaim.  
Self-dubbed cognoscenti and alleged intellectuals—  
who are fundamentally ignorant of it—are thus ineffectual

also when it comes to reading the Bible intelligently: for they do no more, finally, than reject the same pseudo-literal interpretation of figures of speech that lead crude literalists straight off their rocker. What appears to follow inevitably from this is that one needs to have read modern verse in order to interpret ancient prophecy as it deserves, or simply so as not to be somehow *mised* by it.

“To have had the fortune to read poems and understand their deeper meanings, in any event, is a great advantage. One may even have unsheathed the pen and written a few in one’s youth, or occasionally tried one’s hand at an imitation or two, without requiring an ambulance. But to envisage writing them as an adult *occupation*—if one has had any choice in the matter at all—is a dangerous sign of delusion, which should prompt one to call for the straightjacket immediately, without procrastination. The medieval minstrel’s complaint ‘*carmine non dant panem*’—‘song does not give bread’—is as true today as it was then, and there is a secret reason why that is the case.

“I have yet to meet someone who did not already know it: it is practically impossible to make a living as a poet—a fact which bespeaks of the very particular place the art occupies in both the culture and the society. Professions which enjoy such a negative notoriety are taboo amongst the general public. The bard’s is infamous also for being incomparably hard on the heart and mind of its practitioners, whose rate of suicide and mean life expectancy are rather higher and shorter, respectively, than those of other intellectual laborers. A dictionary—the ‘Poet’s Bible’ by definition—is, on this account, the single most dangerous book floating around: a record that might strike one as humorous

since the wordbook is among the most ubiquitous of volumes, which aims to facilitate felicitous verbal expression, with applications varied and numerous and even children in grade school as habitual users. But the work of the poet, if he or she is not merely a boozier, is to struggle *against* the fascination that words exert upon one, to rend the compact representational fabric they incessantly weave, and to retrieve from the attic clues to the primal Mystery over which it is spun.

“So now we come to my own scant experience in the realm of the deeply mysterious and near the strange, almost embarrassing, parts of my story. Of visions extraordinary, there have been several and of two categories. In the first were what one might call ‘parallax views’: projections of consciousness outside of my body and, by transposition, into the mind of persons who were in front of my eyes, whose thoughts I could either read clearly or, as circumstantial reasons led me to believe, were of a nature that could be safely surmised. I emphasize the empathic moment in the process because it is the sole common datum in my possession that describes the beginning, or catalysis, of what then took place, which participated largely of the divine.

“Imagine feeling the steady progression of Time through every individual atom and every event without the immediate onset of chance distractions to turn the sensation awry and reduce to fractions what continues relentlessly to occur as a whole. Imagine, in effect, becoming tangibly one with the physical time-space continuum and intimations of the immortality of the soul

surging to full dominion over all hesitation  
or doubt, on the strength of the concatenation  
of every phenomenon with every other.  
After the soul's ecstatic perambulation (or the spirit's,  
or the mind's, as distinguos between them only get on one's tits)  
came to an end at the swinging of the rudder,  
what one brought home with one was the indelible  
impression that everything that happens is inevitable,  
predetermined down to the minutest detail,  
and that an equipollent measure of critical acumen  
is necessarily the prerogative of but a very few men  
and women: notions whose heuristic value is nil,  
yet which, in themselves, formed a crowning achievement.

“But what about pain, grief, bereavement,  
and the whole band of demons that foment  
all that is most abominable amongst us?  
The satoris described above subsumed the fuss  
they create in our lives, while the real torment  
they bring was grit for the teeth of the second  
category of apparitions with which I have reckoned.  
The latter are also the reason I have embarked  
upon this description of my deontological motives  
for writing in verse, which include a votive  
and witness-bearing impulse as a central part....”

## Canto VIII

“... Once, to my own stupefaction, I observed a devil abandon the body of a woman I shared a bed with, because it suffered not the unflinching kindness and patience with which I was countering the chronic condition of anger I had first found her in. I am reluctant to think it was mental blindness that kept her from noting the horned chimera that escaped from her bosom: there is no camera which could have recorded the image I recognized as being of rage incarnate, and it would be an understatement to say I myself could hardly believe the monster I had unwittingly exorcized; yet, as sure as she then let out a great sigh of relief, it is certain that I, at least, clearly saw why!

“On another occasion, a personification of laziness more horrid than sheer fantasy could have devised appeared as if on a stage in front of my eyes for my private scrutiny, to my utter amazement: a square-jawed crone, ragged, disheveled, the very portrait of Sloth at home in Hell; it sat there hunchbacked upon a small stool ranting, whining willful infirmity, repeating incessantly and for all eternity its refusal to do anything or even to move. The faceless impresario who had set up the show must have been determined that I should not disown

or put into question the reality of my vision since, of a sudden, rays of coherent green light then shot out of my eyes and landed right upon the pitiful figure, that it might be pinned on my conscience for the rest of my days.

“The godhead—or whatever which way you want to call the overpowering entity that presides over such paranormal activity in the brain—affixes moral responsibility as a mark of identity. It was Christ in person, according to Swedenborg, who told him to stay away from the smorgasbord and opened his season of divination galore. Though my credibility be bound to suffer amongst the atheists who have heard me thus far, I too must claim to have perhaps seen Our Lord, if only in profile and silhouetted. Tall, thin, erect, with a hooked nose and in a long cape, He pointed to a round mark on the ground near His feet (not unlike the spots at Saint Pete’s where Bernini’s colonnades all radiate from and conjoin) while these words came to me as if telepathically: ‘This is the place from which all things seem sad.’ My immediate, instinctive reaction was to step back, away from that nerve-center of gloom; and, in an instant, I was again safe in my room, alone but for the bee that had been put in my bonnet.

“There was something peerless in the Shadow’s demeanor that led me to believe it was Him I had seen, just as the sentence that had been enounced was charged with a unique authority; the aquiline trait brought to mind the Florentine

forefather of all poets visionary, but I found no reason in my heart to doubt it was Jesus. Similarly, when I eventually took out a new lease on life and traced my way back to that pole of dismay, I discovered that it displayed no more and no less than the whole human race run ashore, dead as nails as it were, with myself as the sole live witness left at the fatal end of its story; then, in my arms, it was His body I did hold.

“One last episode and I shall have taken full stock of my netherworld inventory as it now stands: once, when I had been left to gather the strands of an n<sup>th</sup> shattered hope, I perceived van Gogh’s painting as I had never before or ever have since; the pity encrypted therein caused me to wince and to envisage, for a brief moment, what I gather everyone might see when they finally meet up with their Maker. It may seem like a storm in a tea cup compared to the venerable archetypes on the matter, because it involves but a single figurant, who was under the spotlight for only a few instants; yet, the quick appearance sufficed to convince me of some of my own psyche’s fundamental convictions. The figure—solitary and without other constrictions than a white robe and a tragic mask of ancient Greek inspiration—stands forth suddenly from behind a shifting curtain of clouds of the cumulous kind; it lets out a scream (of which I catch what sounds like just the beginning) in an unheard-of register, well beyond the compass of what can be considered normally audible by human ears. Outside the bounds of Earthly expectation in high pitch and volume, it turns all bodily frame into fully dissoluble,

friable substance, scathed to pure naught  
in fast-flying seconds by a wrathful wind  
that the cry engenders; while minds get the full drift  
of the agony and horror with which it is fraught.  
Abomination that has been kept pent  
since the immemorial origin of moral sentiment  
invests in equal measure all those who stand before it,  
reduces them to small heaps like cottage cheese  
before they can even fall to their knees.  
If I am right, prospects are not exactly florid;  
but for all to whom ostentation in life caused disgust,  
the one consolation shall be the voice is Just.”

## Canto IX

The ponderous kerygmas are at last on record:  
be they right on the mark or off by a long shot,  
I trust I have neither peddled nor bought  
articles of faith that cannot be reckoned.  
Now I shall ponder Kerry's charisma  
with a lighter heart, and not compound enigmas.

Woman, artist, mystic: she was already all three  
in the bud when I met her, with more than a tinge  
of natural kindness and comical flair mixed in.  
The Earth had just begun its seventeenth  
orbit around the Sun with her on it,  
while the Moon—whose phases set the rhythm  
of the waxing and waning of moods from the gut, of uterine blood  
the ebb and flood—unveiled to her its full face  
for the two-hundredth time: without a trace of impatience,  
it implied the moment to blossom had come.  
And blossom she did, with a smile in which bloomed  
special promise for me of all people: a boon like a boom  
that raised my prospect all the way up to the stars.

She fared forth a magnetic poetess when we met  
("... Marry the messenger that brings the dark light  
And the thrashing movement within his chest  
Flaming the residue of filtered moonlight  
Casting away the best..."), whereas I laid my bet  
rather more on painting and the visual arts  
as means by and through which to convey

the deepest impressions comprising my days.  
When we encountered again many, many  
years later, she remarked how curious it was  
that we had each specialized in the other's  
original craft: I had not swapped my brush for her pen,  
nor had she left a page blank to bedaub a canvass,  
yet the common pursuit of a veridical language  
had caused us both to revise our artistic plans.  
The sad truth about the way the world was evolving,  
the uncontainable, swelling tide of mediocrity  
dumbing down everything that lay in its path  
had forced us to set aside our envisaged professions—  
which had been architecture in her case, film direction  
in mine—in favor of activities we could engage in  
without need of others, independent of markets that catered  
to the brutalized masses they themselves had created.

I could think of nothing less tasteful than staging  
gaudy or maudlin *mises en scène* for the dregs of humanity,  
and one final downward tug at my vanity  
told me it was high time I learned how to write.  
Unlikely as it would be that I should ever be published  
and find place in the store chains alongside the rubbish,  
at least I could aspire to put in black and white  
my own values, my own tastes, my own reactions:  
may you rot, brave new dump, with all your contraptions;  
I shall cherish the loves of which you will perish in spite!

Of Kerry's scrape with the sky-scraping crowd—  
if indeed there ever was one—I know nothing about;  
I heard she changed career, that her ideas took flight  
in search of the origin of perspective in Christian art,  
and that the fact it lay secreted inside Giotto's heart  
made her use her own as a medium to bring it into view:  
a novel approach which explains the arch claim of the girl

to be the greatest living art historian in the world.

Giotto was the harbinger of a radically new vision and style in his time, who wrested the Western eye from the hypnotic stare of stock-still Byzantine icons, set it free to dance once again as in Classical times over surfaces modeled by color and reflected light; he reaffirmed the meaning of the human plight with the increased complexity of motifs derived from the great Christian spiritual experience; to precious and dispersed Gothic leanings, he opposed the renewed demands of what is essential—brought linear perspective back into the proscenium, which had flattened since the end of the Roman imperium. But, as Kerry the mystic will tell you, nothing is coincidental.

It would transcend the scope of this memoir in verse to offer more than a glimpse of the jocund universe that her melodramatic approach discloses. Unexpected turns of events at every corner surprise one each time a metaphorical cornea brings some added symbolic depth into focus. Thus, the five stigmata of Francis in a famous fresco—Karl, Groucho, Chico, Harpo, and Zeppo Kerry calls them in honor of the “Jesters of God”, as the Saint referred to his acolytes—are the origins and ends of as many modes of sight, ideal, empathic wounds that are certain to fester if not promptly dressed and seen in the right light.

For my part, I have always wondered whom Christ is actually looking at as He stares straight into and through Judas’s face in the panel at the Arena chapel. If one took, so to speak, a theoretical scalpel to a spot just in front of His eyes, the view of the hidden horizon that would thereby be opened

would coincide with the vanishing point in that moment. It would reveal the invisible line that, in effect, snatches us like fishes out of our reveries and draws us, by the collar or gills, entirely into the picture, all the way to the aleph of the murderous kiss—where we become Judas; where Jesus, transfixed, gazes inside *us*.

Or even, conversely, if it is we the sons and daughters of Man who are about to be slobbered upon by the fink, there is still the same uncommon array of temporal instances which are operative in that instant: the original betrayal two millennia ago, Giotto's portrayal of it twelve centuries later, our personal acquaintance with the Biblical episode in our own lifetime, and the current epiphanic event brought to a head by the orthogonal along which we would probe to the infinite; whatever way you look at it, the result is exquisite.

## Envoi

I have come to the end of the first part of my work  
and hope the spirits that assigned it to me  
will not be displeased with what they perceive,  
that they shall esteem sufficiently pondered the words  
with which I have broached the account they required.  
It is not every day one takes one's leave of the city, retires  
to the country, and seeks there a new sense of permanence,  
of pertinence and belonging in the wake of defeat.  
Nor is it in every season of life that one reaps  
the slow-ripening fruits of such an occurrence,  
observes sap resurge after a radical pruning,  
novel gems burgeon, and one's identity assume,  
like a freshly-lopped tree, stark, defining contours.  
I therefore thank any human being on the planet  
who deems mine not to have been a mere rant or rattle,  
and pour libations to Feronia, to her time-proven cures.