

Runes of Glory



Vanitas by Evert Collier, 1675

“Blank surfaces have never stood a chance / Against the human impulse to express / The Self.”

—Clive James, “Diamond Pens of the Bus Vandals”

by [Peter Dreyer](#) (February 2022)

Art and writing have become obsessions in our society. Major living artists are superstars, and enormous sums are spent to buy their works. Meanwhile, no fewer than eight hundred colleges and universities in the United States offer creative writing programs, whose graduates produce millions of books. Many of these are self-published and likely to sell only a few dozen copies at best. Yet each, if not a crudely commercial product, represents great personal effort and expenditure. "Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness," George Orwell says.

"No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money," Dr Johnson famously said, who by his own example disproved the assertion, as have writers down the ages. For every successful author, however, there are ten thousand failures. And if your creation is by some miracle a critical and/or commercial "hit," there is the further pain of having it reviewed, misinterpreted, mucked about with, and metaphorically trampled underfoot by self-interested critics and commercial exploiters, who'll shamelessly rewrite your *œuvre* to sex it up (the credits to an early film version of *The Taming of the Shrew* famously attribute the play to "William Shakespeare, with additional dialogue by Sam Taylor"). Never mind about that, they'll sex *you* up, the better to market you too!

Ronald Firbank parodied the dreadful process in his novel *The Flower beneath the Foot* (1923): "'Ah! How clever Shakespere!' the Countess was saying. . . . 'I once knew a speech from 'Julia Sees Her! . . .'" perhaps his greatest *œuvre* of all. . . . "Julia Sees Her" is what I like best of that great, great master.' The English Ambassadors plied her fan. 'Friends, Comrades, Countrymen,' she murmured. 'I used to know it myself!'"

You may very likely end up disliking your own work and blush when you find people reading it or watching a film or television version. You might wish you'd never done it, but had simply learned, as Pascal recommended, to remain quietly

in your room.

Even in death, there's no escape. Biographers will blithely ignore your unequivocal request in your will that no biography of you be written (as, e.g., Orwell asked). You may leave explicit instructions (as, e.g., Kafka did) that you wish your unpublished works to be burned. Biographers will not heed you, and your literary executor will publish those fragments anyhow.

Creative scientific and technological innovators are likewise putting their lives on the line. "Making it new" is an eccentric thing to do, and there are no rules for it that are not meant to be broken. No one thought they needed a cell phone until there *were* cell phones, but then everyone needed one. The inventor had to go out on a limb.

Raphael Pattai observes that in the Bible and other early flood narratives technological innovators, like Noah and Utnapishtim in the Gilgamesh epic get detailed instructions from God on how to do it, because boat-building (like building helicopters or computers) "is not a skill discovered or intuited by humanity." Significantly, Jenny Diski says, Noah ends up as "the world's first drunk."[\[1\]](#)

And then there's sports, another category of art. In response to Wittgenstein's assertion that it is impossible to define the term "game," however, the Canadian philosopher Bernard Suits asserted that game-playing is simply a "voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles."[\[2\]](#)

But what if those obstacles are humanly necessary, perhaps in some way *essential* to human nature?

The Homeric goal of the hero is *kléos aphthiton*—undying glory. This applies to the intellectual hero as much as to the warrior. "Look at me . . . everything . . . taken from me,"

Ovid, the prototypical romantic exiled poet, boasts. Though banished by the emperor Augustus to the barbarous Dacian frontier, “still I follow and delight in my genius. Caesar has no power over that.”^[3]

Ovid and Augustus are nevertheless united in the same goal: *they want to be remembered*—remembered as long “as warlike Rome gazes down victoriously on the world,” as Ovid puts it.^[4] It might be argued that they want fame because they have *evolved* to want it—that natural selection has emperors and poets alike in its grip. Although glory may not increase *actual* fitness to survive—the appallingly brief lives of so many famous generals and monarchs in antiquity (e.g., Alexander the Great, dead at 32; Nero, at 30; Caligula, at 28) demonstrate that—it does increase *imagined* fitness. While ordinary mortals are forgotten after a generation or three, the glorified bask in the illusion of immortality. Milton’s “thankless muse” Calliope (aka Poetry) is the mother of Orpheus, who “may pass by an easy metaphor for philosophy personified, “and the “application of Philosophy to civil affairs” occurs when “recognition of the inevitable necessity of death sets men upon seeking immortality by merit and renown,” Sir Francis Bacon says.^[5] “Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise / (That last infirmity of Noble mind) / To scorn delights, and live laborious dayes,” Milton writes. Rather than sporting enjoyably “with Amaryllis in the shade, / Or with the tangles of Neaera’s hair,” the wretched poet serves his “thankless muse.”

That’s one short sociobiological explanation, but there’s a more straightforward one: “Place a group of monkeys or apes in a room together, and if they do not fight or mate, they will groom each other,” Daniel Nettle says. “Repeat the same experiment with a group of people, and if they do not fight or mate, they will talk. . . . For monkeys and apes, grooming releases the body’s endogenous opiates. . . . In humans it

seems that language may have sequestered this mechanism.”[6] Put a bunch of humans in a room, in other words, and if they neither fight nor fuck, they’ll start chatting. Literature is conversation, literally writ large. “The mind is a narrative machine,” the late E. O. Wilson comments.[7] These views, extensively discussed by specialists, make sense to me.

Baudelaire thought that the trick to big-time literary success was to come up with a winning cliché. “Creating a cliché, that is genius. I must create a cliché,” he admonished himself (“Créer un poncif, c’est le génie. Je dois créer un poncif.”).[8] His French word for “cliché,” *poncif*, derives from *ponce*, a term of art meaning something “unoriginal.” Without going further into its interesting etymology,[9] let us recall simply that in English a ponce is a pimp, one who lives on the earnings of prostitution. From the perspective of obscurity, there is always a meretricious element to notoriety. On such grounds, “fame whores” are contemptuously denounced in social media, commonly by other fame whores.

Baudelaire surely had in mind the immortal characters created by Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and, in France, Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, and Alexandre Dumas *père* (fellow members of his in the Club des Hashischins, where hashish and opium were legally enjoyed). These men had all made lots of money, something Baudelaire badly needed. And they had become both wealthy and famous by creating the prototypes for great *poncifs*: *Ivanhoe*, *David Copperfield*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Jean Valjean*, *Vautrin*—and, especially, perhaps, *d’Artagnan*, *Athos*, *Aramis*, and *Porthos*, the inventions of Dumas *père*, who was the grandson of a Haitian slave.

What a creator of terrific *poncifs* old Dumas was! Working till late into the night, sustained by prodigious consumption of caffeine, he had no sooner produced the final sentence of *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (1844), it is said, than he drew a line

across the page, wrote *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne* (later translated as *The Man in the Iron Mask*), and went on with scarcely a pause for a coffee break.

Baudelaire's greatest inspiration in this respect was, however, that American great contriver of *poncifs* Edgar Allan Poe, in whom he saw a master spirit: "The first time I opened a book of his, I was both terrified and delighted to discover in it, not merely the topics of my dreams, but actual sentences of mine, which he'd written twenty years earlier," he writes.^[10] Poe, in his day, had pirated and parodied the writings of Thomas de Quincey (which Baudelaire also translated). De Quincey's avatar the English Opium-Eater is perhaps the ur-narco cliché of modernity.

All these astonishing literary inventions were in the first place works of genius, of course. If they quickly evolved into *poncifs*, it was because they had so forcefully captured the popular imagination. It was a catch-22 *avant la lettre*. If you sold well enough, albeit only posthumously, your *poncifs* would make you rich and famous. Unless you were famous, though, you were unlikely to sell well enough.

The creators of great *poncifs* became wildly famous. Edinburgh's main railway station is named for Walter Scott's *Waverley*. A ship bearing the latest installment of Dickens's serial *The Old Curiosity Shop* was mobbed when it docked in New York by frenzied fans, who yelled at the sailors, "Is Little Nell dead?" Two million people followed Victor Hugo's coffin to the Panthéon in Paris. The musical version of *Les Misérables* is performed in world capitals to this day, and in Vietnam's Cao Dai cult, Hugo is still venerated as a saint.

Baudelaire too became famous in the end, of course. But he never got rich, he died insolvent. What the anonymous author of *Beowulf* calls *dóm unlytel*: "unlittle doom"—*dóm* in Old English signifying judgment, opinion, destiny, or praise^[11]—came to him only posthumously, when his writings

finally earned enough to enable his mother to pay his debts. He never made it to the Panthéon but had to be content with a place in the Montparnasse Cemetery.

“In a general way it’s very difficult for one to become remarkable,” Joseph Conrad observes in his novel *Chance* (1913). “People won’t take sufficient notice of one, don’t you know.” Ironically, perhaps, this was to be the first of Conrad’s books to hit the jackpot. Although critically acclaimed, he had struggled making a living as a writer until then.

“As Immanuel Kant pointed out in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, if there is an objective reality, it is unknowable,” the psychologist Robert Sternberg writes. “All we can know is the reality we construct. That reality takes the form of a story.” [\[12\]](#) Fiction serves to enlarge our brains and develop our consciousness. Hence, it may be regarded not only as fun but as entirely necessary into the bargain. Invention and thought are kissing cousins; stories in all their forms are simply humanity chatting itself up. “I never understand anything until I have written about it,” the influential English Gothic connoisseur and author Horace Walpole (1717–97) said.

Three men I have known who succeeded in spawning brilliant clichés may serve as examples of the process. Each was left highly unsatisfied by renown but nevertheless made a significant contribution to his world, two of them by writing stories and the third, although also a writer, by inventing a tremendous technological *poncif*.

After his *Tropic of Cancer* came out in Paris in 1934, Henry Miller himself became a *poncif*. To borrow a line from Zhou Enlai, it’s probably too early to judge the historical impact of the sexual revolution, but it has surely been enormous,

perhaps even greater than that of the French Revolution—and Henry was its Marat, if not its Mao. It is hard to reckon how much the whole world has changed for both better and worse since pre-*Tropic of Cancer* times. Resurrected, our great-grandparents would doubtless be amazed and horrified by the transformation.

“I have no *pudeur*,” Henry told me. And I’ve thought about that for years, wondering if I, too, ought to aspire to have none. “Modesty, decency, bashfulness, shame, reserve” is what *pudeur* means, according to my French dictionary. And then there’s *attentat à la pudeur*: indecent assault. To say, “I have no shame” is not quite the same thing as to say, “I have no *pudeur*.” But Henry’s genius perhaps, above all, involved being *seen* as not having any of either.

Lord of the Flies, the novel that made William Golding famous, appeared in 1954. Winston Churchill was then prime minister; in April, the BBC ran the first episode of the first British TV soap opera; in June, the Eurovision Network launched with a message from Pope Pius XII, and the first Wimpy bar opened in London. In America, the words “under God” were added to the Pledge of Allegiance; Marilyn Monroe married Joe DiMaggio, and Bill Haley recorded “Rock Around the Clock.” Golding’s book offered an apocalyptic vision of how upper-class white boys might behave absent such cultural frills.

Later, Golding also, in collaboration with his friend James Lovelock, came up with what Golding dubbed “the Gaia hypothesis,” which has subsequently come to be what is perhaps the greatest *poncif* of them all, since human society and the life of the planet itself may arguably depend on our grasping it.

Arthur Morris Young [\[13\]](#) was a writer, but not a writer of fiction. He wished first and foremost to be seen as a cosmologist and philosopher. His greatest work was, however, his lovely whirlybird, the Bell-47D1 helicopter, designed and

produced in 1945, which can be seen hanging in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.[\[14\]](#) A cliché of the Korean War, remembered in Robert Altman's 1970 film *M*A*S*H* and the subsequent television series of the same title, the Bell-47D1 more broadly bespoke the era of overhead surveillance we now inhabit.

Arthur may be thought of as an example that proves the rule. If he failed himself to achieve *dóm unlytel*, his helicopter certainly did. Paradoxically, he missed the brass ring on fame's carousel because, in the metaphysical sense, he lacked *pudeur*: he was willing all too uncritically to consider almost any idea, no matter how nutty. While openness to all suggestions is perhaps an excellent thing in a cosmologist, it should obviously be paired with what Hemingway called "a built-in, shockproof bullshit detector." And sharp as he was, Arthur was quite innocent of any such thing. Inevitably, when he tried to interest Bertrand Russell in his far-out cosmological theories at a party, Russell simply brushed him off with a blatant lie, saying that he had given up philosophy and now devoted himself exclusively to women.

These men's stories are, I think, instructive of human self-expression: what might happen when we give way to it, and why we nonetheless should allow ourselves that luxury, never mind the personal cost.

Henry Miller: The Marat of the Sexual Revolution

I met Henry at his home in Pacific Palisades one Sunday afternoon in 1976. Twenty years earlier, he had been a legendary figure to us in Cape Town's tiny Bohemian set. When Ron Nowicki and I interviewed him for the *San Francisco Review of Books*, he had just been made a *chevalier* of the Légion d'honneur by French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Paris prostitutes, who claimed Miller had denigrated them, picketed

the Élysée Palace (France's equivalent of the White House) in protest. Henry just didn't get it—he liked whores, he said, and he'd always gotten on well with them! But the successors of the *filles de joie* he had befriended in the 1930s now regarded themselves as *travailleuses du sexe*—"sex workers"—a professional category their grandmothers would probably have seen as *risible*.

A French TV crew is there to interview him that day. "La France était comme une mère pour moi," he tells them in his outrageous Brooklyn accent. After they'd left, shyly asking for his autograph, we chatted away for the rest of the afternoon, drinking a bottle of California *gros rouge* Ron and I had brought.

Miller was eighty-five, in poor health. He'd had a stroke. He had a weak heart and arthritis: "I have everything!" he said. His fifth wife had split on him too. Still, he was cheerful and excellent company—a clubbable man, like Bill Golding. (I'd love to have brought them together.) Henry indicated, though, that he didn't much care for the human race. "When I think of Swedish men I think of drunks," he said. The Japanese "are bastards." The Turks are "an abominable people. They're barbarians, you know, really. Brutal!" As for the British, "They're a bunch of swine" (Larry Durrell had told him so, it seems, and he should know). As for the French, "in private I can say a lot of nasty things about them."

Henry especially hated, or claimed to hate, America. So, I asked him, why then had he lived in the United States for the past thirty-six years? "I didn't come back of my own accord. I was sent back by the American consulate, to save my life," he said. "Because when the Germans came they rolled right over the Greeks and I would have been one of the casualties."

But the Germans hadn't invaded Greece until April 1941—even the abortive Italian invasion only began in October 1940—and Henry had sailed from Piraeus in December 1939. "When I landed

in Boston I cried, I wept, not with joy but with disappointment," he recalled. Nonetheless, he tolerated what he called "the air-conditioned nightmare" for the rest of his days.

Henry didn't like modern writers, but spoke enthusiastically of Marie Corelli (1855–1924), a British novelist now forgotten, although she sold more books in her heyday than Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling and H. G. Wells combined. James Agate judged Corelli to have "the mentality of a nursemaid." I too had once enjoyed reading her—but I was only twelve then.

"I don't give a shit about politics!" Henry said. But there had been some great politicians, especially French ones, he thought—as an example, he cited Édouard Herriot, the radical-socialist Cartel des gauches prime minister (perhaps best known today as one of the leading contemporary deniers of the Holodomor, the Stalinist famine in Ukraine, which killed perhaps five million people in 1932–33). Herriot was "a wonderful man. Imagine, a man who wrote about Beethoven, who was thoroughly immersed in music and a big heavy man. I must tell you Herriot is supposed in France to have had a prick so big, like a horse cock, that he had to strap it to his leg, do you know."

In 1940, George Orwell had deemed Miller "the only imaginative prose-writer of the slightest value who has appeared among the English-speaking races for some years past," but nonetheless "a completely negative, unconstructive, amoral writer, a mere Jonah, a passive acceptor of evil, a sort of Whitman among the corpses."

Perhaps intoxicated by his own phrase-making, Orwell failed to see that Henry was in fact an almost stereotypically puritanical romantic. Anaïs Nin, a very acute observer, who loved him, and who probably knew him better than anyone else, speaks of his "German sentimentality." He kept house "like a

Dutch housekeeper” and was “ashamed of his orderliness,” she writes, adding that he was “absolutely helpless in practical matters.”^[15] His habit of repeatedly tacking “don’t you know” onto sentences was perhaps a Germanism, but it struck me as evidence of diffidence—a flash of *pudeur* showing through his protestation that he had none.

If Henry wanted to be regarded as an intellectual, it was, alas, as an author of dirty books that he became famous. Rather than Orwell’s dismal image of him as a “Whitman among the corpses,” he became a sort of Marat of the burgeoning sexual revolution. As such, he had trouble getting out of his revolutionary tub. His *dóm* as a pornographer was so unlittle, he metaphorically had to strap it down like Herriot. “I’m the king of smut,” he complained mildly. *Playboy* had “adopted him as a kind of patron saint.” In old age, he kept falling for gold-diggers, corresponding with women who sent him photographs of themselves naked, and sometimes even clippings of their pubic hair. The Nepenthe restaurant on Highway 1 at Big Sur, south of Monterey in California, kept a telescope trained on his idyllic retreat overlooking the Pacific and charged tourists a quarter to look through it.

When all is said and done, though, it was for humankind that he had, so to speak, taken off his pants. Albeit he said rude things about people in private, what he really wanted was for everyone to see how great he was. He had the good fortune to be a born optimist. What could be more American than that? *The Happiest Man Alive*, the title of one biography proclaims him to be, while that of another describes him as *Always Merry and Bright*. One couldn’t help liking the old sansculotte! He’d done what needed to be done. Someone had to do it!

William Golding: Bolonius meets Gaia

My son Jacob was taught in junior high school that the

inspiration for William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* had been the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*. But Golding himself told me that he had said this simply to fob off "some American" academic who had been pestering him for his sources. *The Battle of Maldon* was the first thing that sprang to mind—although Ralph and Piggy can by no stretch of the imagination be equated with the Anglo-Saxons Byrhtnoth and Wulfstan, or their Viking opponents with Golding's feral choirboys.

John Carey asserts in his biography *William Golding: The Man Who Wrote "Lord of the Flies"* that Ann Golding had "vetoed any further visit" to Greece after the Colonels' coup of April 1967. Perhaps she did, but the following year found the Goldings on Astypalea, an island in the Dodecanese. We were respectively arriving and departing guests of Lal and Peter Green, the distinguished classicist (much later, to his disgust, Newt Gingrich's favorite historian). A photograph of us in an Astypalean taverna may be submitted in evidence.



The author with William Golding, Peter Green, Ann Golding, and Lal Green, Astypalea, Greece, ca. 1968. Photo by Marijke Hermans

Golding insisted on paying for all the many bottles of the inexpensive (this being the Dodecanese, a duty-free region) Italian beer we drank, explaining, "It's only monopoly money to me, you know!" This frequent jocular remark of his has since been taken to prove that he felt that his success as a writer was "undeserved." The critic Stephen Medcalf has claimed that he was actually a split personality and that his works were written, not by him, but by an "austere, poetic, sensitive and ruthless" alter ego, or "daemon." Golding seems to have gone along with this with his usual good humor, even cooperatively naming this writing daemon "Bolonius."

Golding's work furiously protests the violation of live things. In *The Inheritors*, which he regarded as his best novel, he tackles a mystery that remains of great interest: what happened to *Homo sapiens's* competitor species, the Neanderthals? Did our forebears exterminate them, as the native Tasmanians were exterminated, and the San very nearly were in southern Africa? In *The Inheritors*, they do (although a Neanderthal baby survives in the book, perhaps to perpetuate its genetic heritage in the "new people").

It was Golding who suggested to the scientist and environmentalist James Lovelock (1919–), who lived in the same Wiltshire village as the Goldings, that Lovelock's theory of Earth's biosphere as a living organism with a capacity for self-regulation be called "the Gaia hypothesis." Lovelock contends that extreme climate change is inevitable, and that it is beyond our capacity to stop it or even significantly reduce it, although perhaps, he speculates, Gaia will somehow take a hand in this.

With his considerable earnings as a writer, Golding bought himself a mansion in Cornwall, and was burgled. He thereupon bought himself a shotgun to defend against burglars and shot a rabbit, which pained him: "Every time I think of it I see his expression as he was blown back, a combination of astonishment and outrage—I am a live thing being violated!" Bill felt that

way himself. He was being violated by his fame. *Dóm unlytel* for him involved the nightmare of giving lectures and traipsing around the world on tours sponsored by the British Council—the British Cow, we used to call it. Marijke Hermans (who had taken that snapshot of us in the taverna on Astypalea) found it highly frustrating to have to play nursemaid to Golding when he went to lecture at the British Council in Athens, for which she worked. He drank too much, shambled around, left the script of his talk in a taxi, and was only got to the podium in the nick of time.

Golding didn't *have* to go around giving such talks, of course. So why *did* he? "All things can tempt me from this craft of verse," Yeats says. Moreover, HM Revenue appropriated a lot of what he earned from his writing, and he was perhaps living beyond his means—fame keeps one's nose to the grindstone too. In the summer of 1993, he was found dead, fully dressed, in a bathtub, where he had been left to sleep off the effects of the previous night's drinking.

He wrote some very fine novels, among them that bestseller with the winning title. As is often the case, it was the title that made the book. But it wasn't *his* title. Golding had submitted his manuscript as "Strangers from Within." An editor at Faber & Faber named Alan Pringle came up with *Lord of the Flies* (Hebrew "Beelzebub" in translation), [\[16\]](#) under which the novel exploded into worldwide fame. *Strangers from Within* would perhaps not have done so.

"De mortuis nil nisi veritas," Bill liked to say: "Of the dead, let there be nothing said but the truth." And the truth of him is, he served human liberty (as Yeats puts it in his translation of Jonathan Swift's Latin epitaph). In expressing himself, he said things we all needed to know.

Arthur M. Young: The Flight of the Psychopter

Arthur Young, the inventor of the Bell helicopter, whom I knew in the 1970s, when he launched the Institute for the Study of Consciousness in Berkeley, California, is remarkably *unfamous* for the creator of such a remarkable *poncif*. Scion of a Philadelphia Main Line family (his father was Charles Morris Young, a well-known American painter), Arthur did mathematics at Princeton in the 1920s, then decided that he would devote himself to working out what he called a "Theory of Structure and Process." He was inspired both by Einstein's relativity theory (a special course had been created in it for him at Princeton, in which he was the only student) and quantum physics and by the mathematical logic of Bertrand Russell. Despairing of making any headway, Arthur resolved to tackle some problem to which the answers could be tested in practice. He considered working on television or sound on wire, but finally decided on the helicopter. One of his first inventions was a torqueless gear. He needed propellers of greater efficiency than the standard airplane propeller and he built a device like a whirling arm, instrumented for torque, thrust, RPM, and velocity. RPM presented difficulties, because the speed of the arm was added to that of the propeller when the arm moved, and he accordingly provided a double differential gear that would subtract the motion of the arm from the indicator reading. Later, when he tried to measure the torque resistance due to this added part and found there was none, he realized that the drive was torqueless.



The Bell 47G Helicopter developed by Arthur Young

Working with small models, he discovered how to provide stability through a stabilizing bar and perfected a remote control. He showed off his models and a film of one of them in flight at a meeting of the Rotary Wing Society in New York, where Igor Sikorsky suggested that he work with the Sikorsky team. Later that year, however, he was invited to demonstrate his model to the engineers at Bell Aircraft. This led to a contract, in which Young assigned his patents to Bell and the company agreed to build two helicopters to his specifications. Finally, on December 8, the first production helicopter, Model 47, was ready for flight, equipped with the bubble canopy that would eventually become famous in the film and TV series *M*A*S*H*. Model 47 received the world's first commercial helicopter license, Helicopter Type Certificate H-1, from the Civil Aeronautics Administration (predecessor to the FAA), on March 8, 1946. To Young's horror, Larry Bell promptly ordered parts for five hundred. Eventually, almost six thousand Bell 47 helicopters would be built, and perhaps two out of three helicopters flying today are descended from the original Model

47. In relation to Bell helicopters, Arthur explained to me, Sikorsky helicopters are like creatures of the same genus but different species (e.g., tigers [*Panthera tigris*] and lions [*Panthera leo*]).

By the time it was certified, Young had already sent in his resignation to Larry Bell. "I am interested now in the Psychopter," he wrote. "The Psychopter is the winged self. It is that which the helicopter usurped. . . . To be free of the laws we must know what they are. That is the role of consciousness."

Alas for Arthur's Psychopter, "the very question [of the nature of consciousness] was considered to be in poor taste . . . outside the bounds of real science," Laura Sanders writes. The "C-word" was "met with scorn in polite scientific society" in Arthur's lifetime. Things would change, though: "Today consciousness research has become a passion for many scientists. . . . A flood of data is . . . enabling meaningful evidence-based discussions about the nature of consciousness." [\[17\]](#)

It was in quantum physics above all that Arthur found the basis for his new paradigm of reality, described in his books *The Reflexive Universe* and *The Geometry of Meaning*. He came to believe that Heisenberg's famous Uncertainty Principle,

demonstrated to be fundamental to the behavior of atomic particles, can be equated with freedom, placing a definite limit on determinism as a means of understanding the universe. . . . the unpredictability of nuclear particles is an indication that we have reached the realm of action rather than of things, and . . . will never be 'overcome.' In other words, the uncertainty of the electron must be seen as ontological, and not simply as epistemological. The quantum of action (the photon or fundamental unit of light) cannot be comprehended in terms of space and time. In fact, it is from the photon, from light, that mass, energy, and time are born,

and it must therefore be recognized as “first cause”—which is precisely the teaching of revealed religion.

The indeterminacy which is confusing to the physicists should, Young contends, be regarded as a great and positive discovery, disclosing an order of which we are a part, more basic than the material universe [emphasis added].[\[18\]](#)

Ideas like Young’s have come to seem far less revolutionary nowadays. The philosopher Christopher Norris writes:

There is a large supply of present-day (quasi-)scientific thinking . . . linked to . . . far from decisive empirical results. . . . Nowhere is this more evident than in the past hundred years of debate on and around the seemingly paradoxical implications of quantum mechanics. Those paradoxes include wave/particle dualism, the so-called “collapse of the wave-packet,” the observer’s role in causing or inducing said collapse, and—above all since it appears the only way of reconciling these phenomena within anything like a coherent ontology—faster-than-light interaction between widely separated particles.[\[19\]](#)

Arthur was always prepared to take intellectual risks. He had no *pudeur* about that. “The scientists are so housebroken they’ve forgotten how to pee!” he scoffed. He did not buy into what he called “the monk’s vow of science,” as he called the belief that the universe is objective and suggested in conversation with me that physicists might telekinetically be *creating* the subatomic particles they observed. He liked to quote Alfred North Whitehead’s *mot*: “Scientists, animated by the purpose of proving they are purposeless, constitute an interesting subject for study.”

Wherever there was any doubt about something, sheer contrarianism led Arthur to err in the opposite direction from the received position. Crackpot ideas were catnip to him. He

not only, for example, bought into the idea that Bacon wrote Shakespeare but believed that Bacon also wrote the works attributed to Marlowe, Spenser, Burton, Peele, and Greene, and that he was the son of Elizabeth I and Leicester, conceived when they were both imprisoned in the Tower under Bloody Mary, and that Essex was Bacon's younger brother . . .

Arthur was also into astrology; in 1987, he published a monograph titled *Science and Astrology: The Relationship Between the Measure Formulae and the Zodiac*. His "astrological autobiography" would be published posthumously. [\[20\]](#)

Some scientists have finessed their metaphysical leanings without harm. Newton was a Fifth Monarchy man, an aspiring alchemist—perhaps even a Rosicrucian. Leibniz's *Théodicée* seeks to explain and justify God's mathematics (perhaps, in a sense, anticipating the conjunction of Darwin with Alan Turing). Einstein disputed quantum mechanics on the grounds that God "does not throw dice." Max Planck was a churchwarden. Werner Heisenberg was at any rate some kind of Lutheran.

After a lecture at Arthur's redwood-paneled Berkeley mansion, someone asked the speaker—either the Cherokee-Shoshone medicine man Rolling Thunder or his coeval Mad Bull, I can't recall—whether the spirits of the Indians and the settlers could ever be reconciled. "Their bones meet underground," the nonplussed shaman said, after a moment's thought, and a UC Berkeley student sitting in front of me dutifully noted this down: "The bones meet underground," I read over her shoulder.

Golding succumbed to his "old, old anodyne," booze. "Perhaps, as people say, the Nobel Prize is a kiss of death," Frank Kermode writes, calling him "the laureate of a guilt culture." [\[21\]](#) Henry Miller, who had wanted to be seen as an intellectual, found himself branded a smut hound. Arthur Young never found the acceptance, or even consideration, of his

ideas by the scientific/philosophical intelligentsia that he had sought all his life, which must have been a bitter pill indeed for him to swallow.

Like the rest of us, Miller, Golding, and Young might be said to have had only themselves to blame for their fates. I choose myself to think that whatever their flaws all three were great men—if you will permit me that old-fashioned solecism.

It's been a long, long while since "warlike Rome" gazed "victoriously on the world" and poets dreamt of *kléos apthiton*. Who reads Ovid now, professional classicists aside? "Tout passe, tout casse, tout lasse," as the French say. Everything passes, breaks, grows weary.

Nevertheless, the freight trains that run to and fro through the woods behind my Virginia house are decorated with elaborate graffiti, always already created afresh by unknown artists, who must presumably have crept into grimy railroad yards at dead of night with all their paraphernalia of paints and brushes and labored long to craft them. With no hope whatsoever of "undying glory," or even of ever being known as artists to anyone at all but a few choice pals, they expressed themselves anyhow, like Clive James's bus vandals with their "diamond pens."

There's just no denying that urge!

[1] Raphael Pattai, *The Children of Noah: Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times* (Princeton: N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), cited by Jenny Diski, "Did Jesus Walk on Water Because He Couldn't Swim?" *London Review of Books*, 20, no. 16 (August 20, 1998).

[2] Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 1978 [3d ed., 2014]), 43.

[3] Ovid, *Tristia* 3.7.47–48: ingenio tamen ipse meo comitorque fruorque: / Caesar in hoc potuit iuris habere nihil.

[4] Ibid., 51–52 : dumque suis victrix omnem de montibus orbem / prospiciet domitum Martia Roma.

[5] Sir Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, *Wisdom of the Ancients*, XI, “Orpheus; or Philosophy.”

[6] Daniel Nettle, “What Happens in Hamlet? Exploring the Psychological Foundations of Drama,” in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, ed. Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 65

[7] E. O. Wilson, “Foreword from the Scientific Side,” *ibid.*, ix.

[8] “Fusée,” XIII, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 1: 662.

[9] *Le Robert historique*, s.v., observes that the word has undergone *le développement sémantique le plus riche*.

[10] Baudelaire, letter to Théophile Thoré, June 20, 1864 : « La première fois que j’ai ouvert un livre de lui, j’ai vu, avec épouvante et ravissement, non seulement des sujets rêvés par moi, mais des *phrases* pensées par moi, et écrites par lui vingt ans auparavant. »

[11] E.g., *Sigemunde gesprong æfter deaðdæge dóm unlytel*: “Sigemund got no little praise after he died.”

[12] Robert J. Sternberg, *Love Is a Story: A New Theory of Relationships* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5, quoted by David Sloan Wilson, “Evolutionary Social Constructivism,” in *Literary Animal*, ed. Gottschall and Wilson, 30.

[13] <https://arthuryoung.com/about/arthur-young>.

[14] www.moma.org/artists/6518.

[15] *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*, vol. 1, 1931–1934, edited by Gunther Stuhlmann (New York: Swallow Press and Harcourt, 1966), 11, 48, 62, 84, 301, 351.

[16] John Carey, *William Golding: The Man Who Wrote "Lord of the Flies"* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 161. Pringle, who was also the editor of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, is permitted only a single mention in Carey's biography.

[17] Laura Sanders, "Emblems of Awareness," *Science News* 181, no. 3 (February 11, 2012): 23.

[18] Peter Dreyer, "Foreword," in Arthur M. Young, *The Bell Notes: A Journey from Physics to Metaphysics* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1979), 5–6.

[19] Christopher Norris, "Hawking contra Philosophy," *Philosophy Now*, January–February 2011, www.philosophynow.org/issue82/Hawking_contra_Philosophy.

[20] Arthur M. Young, *Nested Time: An Astrological Autobiography* (Cambria, CA: Anodos, 2004).

[21] Frank Kermode, "The Guilt Laureate," *London Review of Books* 17, 13 (July 6, 1995), www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v17/n13/frank-kermode/the-guilt-laureate. Anthropologists distinguish "guilt cultures," in which an internalized moral code drives social conformity, from "shame cultures," where fear of being shamed motivates it. One might suppose, however, that in any given society or individual, sociopaths excluded, the two factors must inevitably operate simultaneously, forming a guilt-shame feedback loop. "Homeric society" is advanced as an example of a shame culture, but Homeric society is a fiction invented by one or more poets identified generically as "Homer." Achilles is about as realistic a figure as James Bond—which is to say, not a very suitable subject for anthropological speculation.

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