The Number 86: A Humean Tragedy

A psycho-philosophical drama for David Sanderson, Arts Correspondent of The Times

by Paul Martin Freeman (May 2025)

El Flautista, (Remedios Varo, 1955)

> For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perceptions. (David Hume: *A Treatise on Human Nature*, vol I, p 534)

‘Twas on the 86 at Chadwell Heath
While on his way one fateful day to Stratford
That S, a noted journalist from Leith,
Beheld a sight that left his spirit shattered.

Observing people by the staircase round him,
He had the strangest feeling all were dead.
And afterwards the memory would hound him
And fill him with a sense of utter dread.

He fancied that their minds were somehow vacant
As though their very souls had upped and left;
Yet in the face of this they seemed complacent,
Their lives of meaning seemingly bereft.

They had the look of robots or machines;
Automata without a conscious core;
Assembled lumps of empty cells and genes:
Appearances of men, but nothing more.

And S reflected on this awful scene
And wondered if he, too, had lost his soul;
And what, indeed, would such an absence mean
If where his soul had been were just a hole.

His mirror though provided no assistance:
It only showed his old familiar face
With nothing indicating its persistence
Nor intimating something out of place.

And so our hero set about attempting
To see this soul or self of his inside;
And at this nightly, Somnus’ charms neglecting,
Aurora’s light would find him bleary-eyed.

Unable now to work, he took retirement,

Applying himself in earnest even more;
And like a monk in self-imposed confinement
On family and friends he shut the door.

Now, S had thought the task before him easy
To find what he assumed he knew the best;
Indeed you’d say, his mood was bright and breezy
When first this new pursuit he had addressed.

For what did man perceive if not himself
Of whose existence merely thinking proved?
While nothing was more certain than the self:
A truth since Descartes no one had disproved.

Yet when he set about investigating,
Like old Macbeth, he found to his dismay
An unexpected revelation waiting
There blocking on the blasted heath his way.

He noticed when he looked inside himself
He’d stumble on some feeling or perception,
But never would he find the self itself:
The object of his search and introspection.

Hence, love or hate he’d see, or pain or pleasure,
And feelings of the like of every kind;
Yet though he might persist in his endeavour,
No feeler of those feelings could he find.

This odd and unexpected revelation
Quite took our honest Scotsman by surprise.
It filled him with unusual consternation
As reasonably the reader might surmise.

Indeed, our hero now began to panic:
The very thing he’d feared he’d found was true;
He went from bright and breezy straight to manic,

Beside himself with what on earth to do.

He’d lost his self on which his world depended
And with it all contentment disappeared.
As when Iago fond Othello’s ended,
Irrational thoughts of every sort appeared.

His waking hours became a constant nightmare;
No purpose, sense or meaning could he find.
All avenues appeared to lead to nowhere
As S began to slowly lose his mind.

Without a self, he couldn’t get a passport,
Nor credit card, nor job, nor bank account.
They wouldn’t let him board on public transport—
On every side the problems seemed to mount!

But where in God’s creation had he lost it?
He tries to focus now and racks his brain.
Perhaps he’d left it on a train or dropped it,
Or—*Heavens!*—even flushed it down the drain!

The teeming possibilities were endless
With each successive one appearing worse.
He paces up and down, confused and restless—
Not Cain himself endured so cruel a curse!

His searches now at Newham rubbish dump;
He looks at home through every drawer and shelf;
He roots around his local petrol pump,
But cannot find the thing he calls himself.

Deranged, he hunts in Beckton sewage plant;
He sifts the Thames’ befouled polluted shore;
He goes where others loathe to go or can’t
Yet nowhere finds that vital missing core.

The passing weeks and months provide no answer
Nor any clue to where it’s disappeared.
Reproached, it seems, by life and people’s laughter,
His world is bleak, untenanted and weird.

At length, he leaves his home on Chadwell Heath;
Like ancient Lear, he wanders now a tramp.
At night he lies in fields with chattering teeth
Or begs a bed at Romford travellers’ camp.

As Hamlet found his life forever shattered
On learning of the murder from the ghost,
He left behind his own and all that mattered
Because he couldn’t find what mattered most.

He’d lost his world and everything he’d owned
Yet hadn’t found that precious thing he sought.
He trudges on—distraught, despised, disowned,
His every dream and longing come to naught.

And on and on and on he trudges now—
This torment of unreason never ends!
No peace his tragic loss will S allow
Who into bottomless despair descends.

In time though, after many years of suffering,
He thought he’d try the 86 again.
He hides when boarding then, ashamed and shuffling,
Evades the driver’s eyes behind some men.

He looks about, uncertain why he’s there;
He’s feeling weak—he fears he’s going to fall!
He senses people starting now to stare:
No place to go, he’s up against the wall!

With flashing images from long before
He edges down the bus’s crowded aisle.

He keeps his gaze directly on the floor
Yet can't contain a melancholy smile.

Then suddenly he's back at Chadwell Heath!
It's once again that awful, dreadful day!
He's standing by the staircase underneath
Reliving what has never gone away!

He finds a place to sit and settle down
And starts enjoying those long-forgotten sights:
The mums and dads with kiddies on the town;
The burly blokes with purple hair and tights.

But then he looks again with close attention
And grasps at last the truth that now is plain.
The self, he sees, is just a loose convention
That stops us all from going quite insane.

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Paul Martin Freeman's book of whimsical verse, *A Chocolate Box Menagerie*, is published by New English Review Press and is available here. This poem is from the author's unpublished work, *The Bus Poems: A Tale of the Devil*.

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