

NOTEBOOKS OF A PHILOSOPHER

Aaron Parrett

As a man guilty and brooding in the unrelenting and murky tempest of a tequila hangover, Jerbal Prollix decided that it was time for him to defer to destiny and become a philosopher. Never before in his life had the future seemed so certain and inevitable. He kicked off the meager blankets he slept under and walked from his bedroom to the kitchen to wash his face, realizing as he did so that his enterprise would require paper—reams of it. It could not be helped that the love of wisdom and her productions demanded the sacrifice of trees.

He toweled himself, folded the damp cloth twice, set it neatly on the sideboard and walked out of the house to shop for notebooks. Already he began to compose his first aphorism, mentally organizing the way his thoughts would race over the lines of the pages. And here he was derailed by his first conceptual dilemma: did it make more sense to buy lined notebooks, or unlined?

In the store he mused over the selection of notebooks, imagining how their covers would wear and soften with use, and how the pages would swell with rippling promise once soaked with the ink in which he would carefully distill his genius. It would be glorious, though he cloaked his fervor with nonchalance before the salesgirl.

“Are you sure you got them all?” she asked when he set forty-seven Mead COMPOSITION “Square Deal” notebooks (200 pages each, tables of measure and conversion inscribed in the back, faux marbled covers and cloth-taped spines) on the counter.

He smiled. “One short of a case. It will be my ‘lost’ volume.”

“Oh, righhht.” She wondered if he was going to try to barter with her again, like last week, when he offered to trade a box of old paperbacks for some pipe tobacco. No, he had his wallet in hand.

“Do you take cash?”

He spoke with no apparent guile, but she nearly rolled her eyes anyway.

“Yes, sir. We do take cash.”

When she had tapped the repeat key forty-six times, he laid eleven ten

dollar-bills in a neat fan near her hand.

“Keep the change,” he said, over the stack of notebooks under his chin, and walked out of the store. He knew it was essential to begin immediately.

In the shade of the drugstore’s eastern wall, he set the stack of notebooks down, retrieved one from the top of the pile, and sat down, his back to the wall, and began to write.

He found himself mesmerized by the subtle beauty of his own handwriting, the way the loops and angles were formed by some unconscious graphing mechanism inside him. Where was the template for such a neat and careful production of shapes? Already his eyes were red and stinging because he found himself unable to blink, unwilling to dismiss the miracle before him for even the fraction of a second. Furiously he scrawled, his dopamine receptors in apparent loop-feed. Thought soared; pages filled indelibly.

In the afterglow, he read what had appeared between the lines.

A book—the factotum of a book—is the most liminal creation of human experience. More than any symbol or religious article (and many books are both), the idea of a book stands as the fundamental threshold between ourselves and the world, between ourselves and God, between God and the world. We all have a favorite book, even if it exists only as some vague text lodged on a faraway shelf we only reference from memory. Every religion has its Holy Text(s), and wherever there appears a conceptual gap, a book either exists to bridge it, or will be so fabricated.

The book is at once symbolic, linguistic, historic—and beyond the scope of measured time. The physicality of a book—its weight and thickness—ground it in substance and sensation, as something to be picked up and looked at, an object to manipulate and a subject by which to be manipulated. The covers of modern books, their dust jackets, extend this immediate physicality: often the cover bears some famous artwork and hence becomes a museum for some work in another medium. Thus, even unread books are the display cases of our culture. The book is a threshold, a vestibule, not only leading inward towards the vacuum of ideas, but outward, into the outer space of all other books, and moments in history with which it is bound up. The flow of literature cannot sweep away the persistence of the book, and neither can its ideas and concepts and images ever overwhelm the durable weight of a book.

The bulk of paper and ink and threaded signatures sewn to the spine and covers demarcate a limited portion of the old philosopher’s Substance,

but the precise and particular arrangement of its inner symbols created when ink stains the page leads outward into the chaos of which it is an indication. The book is a gateway to discourse, and a handy object for crushing cockroaches.

Newly complacent in a prosy dusk, he lit his pipe. He went back and carefully numbered the pages of what he now considered to be the preface to Volume One. Six pages, double-spaced to allow for future commentary, and revision if necessary. One day these notebooks would be carefully kept in climate-controlled glass cases designed to thwart entropy, while dilettantes of the future would refer to his city in the same tones of reverent nostalgia accorded Athens, Miletus, and Cambridge. He made a mental note to consult a lawyer to determine whether or not he should have a clause inserted in his will and testament similar to Bentham's. It would be a shame, after all, to endure posterity from beneath a lonely mound of headstoned clay.

Darkness settled around him until only the feeble embers in his pipe's bowl glowed, weak but triumphant beneath a duff of ash. He divided the stack of notebooks into two piles, and then, lying on his back, used one as a pillow. He smoked patiently, staring out through the darkness at the river, imagining himself as Huck or Nigger Jim, though oddly aboard the wrong boat. A mad, furious journey fueled by hubris, in pursuit of a pale leviathan, ending badly in the heart of the Congo. The pipe slipped from his lips. He dreamed of consciousness.

When he awoke, the air was refreshingly crisp, though he could not see his breath. The notebooks had shifted in the night, so he restacked them, and retrieved his pipe. The sun had not been up long, but already he felt compelled to add to an already auspicious beginning. He did not bother to read again what he had accomplished the night before, and instead turned to the next fresh page, marked a Roman numeral I at the top of the page, and plunged onward. The first of the multitudes gathering, he thought, multitudes of aphorisms which, shivering, would molt together in the novelty of their forging. The old categories would flutter as diaphanous, flimsy skins, assailed by new wind.

It turned out that rather than compiling his first aphorism, Jerbal merely produced an addendum to the preface. Easy enough to fix, he thought, doubly glad about his spacing choice. Within minutes he was again in the throes of a reverie, dispatching the neat and clever cursive with astonishing celerity. Again he was rapt in the dizzy zone of proprioception, and the world slipped away, even as he plotted its parameters and marked its trajectories. He

felt every heartbeat within him as a pulse of ink flowing from the Uni-ball “vision” Micro. Frantic, he raced to maintain a correspondence of speeds so as to impede neither the flow of thought nor its transmission. He stumbled over his p’s and q’s, but he didn’t mind. The fear of premature exhaustion spurred him on. Intuition told him that when the source was flowing, he could not neglect to tap it. And once it was tapped, he had to wrench from it its consumptive power. When it ended, he read.

We are mostly only willing to confront the world through books, even if those books are eventually transcribed for the television or the big screen. The curious and over-worked feature of our anatomy making this direction of our evolution possible is the opposable thumb. The same anatomical device that allows us to manipulate the computer mouse reinforces our stillborn primitivity: we have always relied on our thumbs to indicate what elements of our culture we will willingly watch die, and which elements we will allow to flourish, from the time of the Roman consuls who gestured with their thumbs to effect the rending of Christians, to the present-day way we indicate our preference for the cyberworld over that tired and precious antique—the book. Thumbs up versus thumbs down must be the original binary function. The same defect that raised us up from all fours and brought us by artifice into a world made habitable through fabrication is the very feature with which we click and point and completely re-screen the world.

But even the book was a machine in its fashion, and so was the scroll before it, and both were scripted to suit the hand. The opposable thumb made us inevitable. It gave us the means by which to fill and empty books, and so to document our inevitability. We forget that each simple one of its diverse and subtle gestures embodies an accompanying range of aesthetic determinations, from the ergonomic shape of the mouse to the cultural death sentences imposed by unforgiving and overfed film critics. It is what we are not: apposable.

The fervor had passed. He read back through the few pages of lines, hoping for a fresh spark from the muse, but nothing moved his pen. Mildly annoyed, and a trifle peckish, Jerbal stood up to take stock. Order of the day, he decided: breakfast. Something substantial but not too hearty; bacon and eggs perhaps, and then he could sequester himself with impunity in the corner of a coffee shop. He would make himself rival Voltaire in both prolificacy and caffeine intake from this day forward. He gathered up his notebooks and prepared to leave.

Hardly had he reached the front of the drugstore before he remem-

bered his wallet, emptied by yesterday's extravagance. A bulk purchase had seemed the thing to do in the grip of such earnest conviction, but he had allowed the compelling prospect of a grand endeavor to beguile him. He was utterly broke.

Damn! He had intended to use that last hundred-odd dollars to secure some kind of new living arrangement, inasmuch as he had been served an eviction notice last week. With sudden dread he tried to remember how many of the ten days had passed. He had meant to make a mental note of the precise date, but had deleted it as an extraneous distraction in the larger context of his enterprise. After all, he was concerned here with nothing less than the production of a potentially totalizing system, for Christ's sake! The striking irony of a situation otherwise worthy of wit was characteristically diminished by the unrelenting palpability of his hunger and impending homelessness.

Well. There was only one thing to do. He would have to return the notebooks, and wager their future re-appropriation on the balance of what he had already written and would finish writing in Volume One. He hated to break up the charming consistency that inhered in the collection of the forty-seven volumes, each empty book screaming for completion, while every notebook filled radiated its quiet, grateful promise. He would have to sacrifice the potential for the actual, and hope against agony that the gesture would be temporary. The one would have to suffice in the apparent absence of the many. He squinted against his tears, pensively lulled an ember to life in his pipe, and carried the stack of notebooks back into the store.

As he set the stack down on the counter, the saleswoman looked him over. Without malice, she said, "I heard about you first thing this morning, buying all those last night."

"Well, actually, something's come up, and I—"

"Need your change back after all, do you?"

"Well, I—" he began, but was thrown off by the quality of her smile. Her patient silence exacerbated his embarrassment, in spite of the fact that she gave off an aura of kindness rather than animosity. Had he been less possessed by his strange ecstasis, he would have realized that she merely found him curious.

"I need to return most of these," he eventually managed.

"The remorse of impulse buying. The logical thing, it seems to me, is to buy them one at a time, anyway. Those books aren't going anywhere."

She totaled up the refund and handed him five twenties and some

change.

“Last night I paid with—I wonder if I could get this in tens?”

“If I have them.”

He folded the sheaf of notes twice and in frustration wedged them in his front pocket. This entire ordeal was costing him valuable production time. Eating was one more thing he had to get out of the way, and then he could meditatively commune with his sole remaining notebook.

Halfway to the café his daimon compelled him to pause at a park bench and open the lonely volume. He sped the pen with confirmed ardor, the intensity of his third entry born as much from the concatenation of ideas as from having to bear the indignity of imminent vagrancy, not to mention the increasing discomfort of an empty belly. All of it vanished as if dissolved into the inkstains drying on the lines. The words were the very ground of his possibility as he ascended the slopes of poetic solipsism. This solitary notebook, scourged by the fervent Uni-ball was the index of his incalculable modality, the manifold of pure perception, of unembodied essence. His open mind had been devoured by Being.

The third book of Genesis presents the famous and original transgression occasioned by Eve’s not-so-faithless eating of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. Knowledge here is not that Platonic, Ideal, or transcendental type that is so often assumed, but rather physical, bodily knowledge (the sort which Aristotle would more quickly recognize), and in particular, the sort brought about by bad food. Suppose that what is described in that third chapter is nothing more than a case of indigestion? The “truth” about knowledge, after all, is hard to swallow. 3500 years of guilt and the analysis of hesitation were misplaced. All that was required was an adequate anodyne—some undiscovered herb or mineral that would have quietly effaced the subsequent Bible.

A dog pissing on his leg broke the epiphany. He kicked at the dog with growing cynicism and cursed the interruption. No matter, the thought had reached completion. He inscribed a Roman numeral II above it, a III below it, and began again.

Wir sind ein Gespräch, wrote Hölderlin. And, from the bathroom wall of a coffeehouse, an appendix:

Poets are dogs among themselves—
 Their fecal matter is arranged
 On their desktop lawns
 In the hope that it will be stepped in

By you or me...

Hence, two ways of viewing ourselves through the filter of language. History records a dialectic set up between 'discourse is shit' and 'shitting is a discourse.' Discourse and defecation, our most noteworthy and noticeable human productions. They are our only predictably interesting affects. One must wade through and wallow in the manure of language to even begin to cultivate anything resembling an idea. Moreover, this dialectic points to the perpetual tension between the poet and the philosopher. The poet is apt to adhere to the first point as a precept, the philosopher to the second, though what makes this dynamic so effective is their mutual propensity to switch poles in the opposition, like the sudden shifts in magnetic polarity observed in the geologic record. One day a poet, the next a philosopher, or vice versa—each one wiping up where the other left off in the great strain of discourse.

He was starving and virtually immobilized by the combination of little food and poor sleep, but he felt compelled to keep scribbling. Already structures were suggesting themselves, grand intimations of complexity tempered by the restraint of a style that would arrest the wayward metaphor and bring seemingly contradictory premises back into the fold of reason. Outlines practically etched themselves into the margins. His grand innovation, the truly enduring contribution he would make to philosophy, would be the casual, almost offhand manner with which he would dispense with footnotes. He would exchange the techniques of digression and subtext for a patiently transparent apparatus which would, like his style, unfold itself, and reveal its self-grounded soundness in its very unfolding.

At the restaurant, he meditated on the sheer immensity of his sublime project and the awe it would elicit when fully realized as he waited for his bacon and eggs. He sipped tepid and somewhat sour coffee, making a mental note to run back by the house and look over the eviction notice. If he could stay there one more night, perhaps he would be far enough along to sacrifice a few hours with his notebook for a quick look around for a new room. It was irritating to have to deal with reality when the promise of a fully consistent, fully complete system beckoned. The eggs were good, however; cooked perfectly, and draped with bacon.

He left a ten under his coffee cup and walked to the house. Half a block away, he stopped and watched as the landlord and the neighbor piled his few remaining books and blankets near the curb. It was probably wiser to return later, after dark, to retrieve at least a few things with which to keep

himself warm, especially if he were compelled to sleep a few nights in the woods. And the books he would burn—what did it matter now? Buoyed by his resilient stoicism, Jerbal turned around and headed for the shops along the river.

Several cups of coffee and a cappuccino later, Jerbal had filled over thirty pages of the notebook. He vowed to fill it completely before nightfall, but had the wherewithal to realize that it really was not up to him. He was merely an amanuensis, a channel through which the ink must pass. He closed his eyes, resting his aching brain and read the last few paragraphs back to himself.

Language and lying. We should remember that philosopher with honor who first suggested that language evolved in order to dissemble. It developed as a means to cover up meaning, and to lead us away from truth, rather than toward it, and that at the heart of communication there circulates a community of false witnesses. The poker game as a metaphor seems appropriate: a setting in which one uses language (both spoken and tacit) to lie about reality, to color it, to lend it a certain profitable meaning. In a word, all language is written in the face of the gambler: mute and indecipherable, even as he generates conversation, taking risks with the truth, but always connecting it to the lie that leads away from himself. We are able to tolerate a multitude of discomforts simply by lying about them. As hypochondriacs we invent discomforts to make us feel less guilty about the truth of our illnesses, and to obscure the boundaries of our health. When truth is displaced, it is the lie that becomes the object of aesthetic concern. Language and honesty are categorically incompatible.

Suppose that gestures and behavioral events are themselves the best conveyors of meaning, that they in fact cannot escape their performative or illocutionary meaning, and that language (both spoken and written) was developed to dissimulate, and to shroud what is revealed in behavior with action. The language of gestures and facial expressions is primarily concomitant with the meaning it is produced to express. The wince at the sight of the eyeball being sliced with the razor blade is itself what it means. No doubt vocalization developed in order to obscure the previously unambiguous meaning carried in the involuntary gesture, and to thereby create an immense new realm of possibility in which dissembling discourse could develop. Henceforth, one could insist “I am not tired” to nullify a yawn. Between gesture and meaning a gulf opens, and is eternally widened by this thing called language. The fertility of language and its increasing specializa-

tion in the last 10,000 years, its flourishing forms and vocabularies, have neither been moves toward the clarification of meaning, nor refinements of some original or transcendental utterance about reality, but precisely the opposite, and mark the evolution of a behavior that is by nature determined to split gesture from meaning.

By the time the coffee shop had closed, sending him alone with his notebook into the cool darkness, he had filled the book three-quarters full. Still reeling in the heady intoxication of exponentially increasing successions of thought, Jerbal stumbled through the night toward the sad pile of his possessions near the gutter. He draped two wool blankets over his shoulders, gathered his remaining books into a third, which he tied into a bundle, and marched toward the woods near the river.

By the light of a fire kindled with dog-eared anthologies and Modern Library paperbacks, he finished Volume One. The allegorical overtones of his situation were not lost on him, and he made a mental note to include somewhere in the Volume the famous epigraph from Newton about standing on the shoulders of giants. Unconsciousness finally descended upon him sometime near dawn.

Over the next few days, Jerbal purchased and filled two more Volumes, further depleting his meager finances. Within a week, his savings had dwindled to a few greasy dollars. He had not shaved in more than a few days and his beard and ragged, burning eyes made people cross the street to avoid him. He wore the same filthy clothes he had had on when he started the enterprise, and now all he had to his name were the three Volumes under his arm, and the blankets folded neatly in thirds under a tree near the river. With utilitarian equanimity, he considered his situation. Then he stripped himself bare, bathed in the river, and washed his clothes. He spent the afternoon naked as Diogenes, lying pensive in the grass, while his clothes dried on the bushes.

As dusk settled, he dressed and took his last few dollars and his three notebooks to the bar. He stretched the two soiled dollars out across three beers, and then solicited drinks from college students he engaged in discussion of his Volumes. He read from them at random, anxious for comments, and eager to explain in extemporaneous detail the system of his vision, the structure of the eventual "set" of forty-seven Volumes, the calculated significance of the problematic "lost" forty-eighth. Eventually his disquisitions failed to generate interest sufficient to inspire the proffer of free beer, and he was drunk enough by then to propose the sale of aphorisms to all

interested parties. One dollar per page, he boldly reckoned. Five or six pages later, he was face down at the bar, snoring on the eviscerated remains of his Volumes.

Like the celebrated Immanuel Kant, Jerbal Prollix went on to live forty-eight more years, dying at the age of eighty, in the same town in which he was born, and in which he penned his Volumes. There was nothing novel in this. In those forty-eight years, Jerbal became a professor, and published an obligatory shelf full of abstruse but conscientious erudition that was, in the end, indistinguishable from the original Volumes, and which remain to this day all but devoid of date-due stamps.

Following an impartial and obscure obituary, Professor Prollix assumed his place in oblivion.