



Losing It

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And as with age his body uglier grows,
So his mind cankers.

The Tempest

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Part I: The Horror

Striking Out

The phrase “striking out” can suit an enterprise launched in grand hope no less than one that ends in humiliating failure. It may also invite an editor to strike out the first sentence and tell me to start over, or just to give it up. If the general themes of this book may strike some as glum and grim, others will find solacing compensation in the “joie de vivre” of its gallows humor, some of which is intended. But such “joie,” like all joy, will soon be followed by a letdown. The figurative trapdoor opens and you drop, and are left dangling.

In common usage, the “it” in “losing it” can stand for any number of things. But in this book, “it” refers mainly to mental faculties—memory, processing speed, sensory acuity, the capacity to focus. Sometimes “it” will mark general physical decay outside the brain, as when I complain about organs and joints, sags and flaccidities, aches and pains. This “it,” whether mental or physical, is more general, and the process of losing it more drawn out, than when “it” stands for a cellphone or virginity, each of which can be lost in mere seconds of thoughtlessness.

You will discern, however, that now and then I lose it in the sense of flipping out, as when a student says, “Miller lost it again in class.” That kind of losing it describes a fit of rage, usually thought of as losing “control,” when the expectation would be for a more modulated show of irritation, or feigned indifference. That particular idiom is quite recent. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates its earliest recorded use to 1976, from England, not America, which might count as a minor surprise.¹ But to lose it in that sense was already latent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when one could lose, if not the pronoun “it,” then nouns like one’s patience or mind,

¹ OED s.v. lose, v.1, draft additions, May 2003, available on updated online version.

something less concrete than the head you could lose to an executioner's axe in fourteenth-century usage.²

The discussions that follow circle around the theme of growing old, too old to matter, of either rightly losing your confidence, or wrongly maintaining it, in culpable ignorance against all the evidence that you are losing it. Yes, you can grow old gracefully. But what does that mean? Does it require withdrawing quietly without making others feel guilty, accepting, if not quite invisibility, then a quiet confinement to the shadows, then to the shades, from where you tell the academic psychologists of the positive psychology movement who study the well-being of oldsters that you couldn't be happier, and these experts, coding your response, are dumb enough to believe you? Does it mean that you don't fight old age with unseemly cosmetic surgeries? That you alter your personality to fit what properly respectable old age is supposed to be? Will you have to affect a certain look? Robert Frostian? But what if you are not blessed with thick white hair and the appropriately etched wrinkles? Just how are you to face decline and the final drawing down of blinds?

I hate confessionalism (except, it seems, my own, which I can manage on terms of my choosing). I am compelled, however, given the subject, to be at times self-referential, though I will mostly do so by attributing my anxieties to you, the reader; or when not making "you" the bearer of the burden, it will be "we," share and share alike.³ Nonetheless, the book will be mostly historical, for in history or in ancient tales, we find more interesting people than either you or me: the likes of David, Joab, Beowulf and his grandfather Hrethel, Lear of course, Enrico Dandolo (who led the Fourth Crusade, blind and over 90), Saint Anskar, apostle to the blond beasts of the North, various ancient Egyptians and curled-bearded dark-haired beasts of Assyria, some Talmudic sages and magic men, several cagey and ruthless denizens of the Icelandic

² OED s.v. lose v.1, 3.b (mind, 16th century), 3.d (patience, from early 17th century); s.v. head n.1, 56, citing Chaucer, *Knight's Tale* v. 1707.

³ We are still somewhat plagued in English by the politics of the neuter third person, for which I mostly use he, him, his, which also functions as the masculine third person. I do not employ she/her as a neuter pronoun, settling instead for the ancient practice of neutering males.

sagas—a berserk Viking, a wily lawyer, two homicidal poets—together with other old cynics, ascetics, and geezers—old Jews, old Christians, old pagans, and dying in the end with Jezebel.

Because the sources care about these things we will worry about when you are too old to take revenge; about how much are you to complain, and in what style. Are there strategies of compelling others to take your complaints seriously? What of despair, sorrow, wistfulness, emptiness, unpaid and unpayable debts, uncollected ones too? And what of the wisdom you supposedly achieve?

Throughout a good portion of history and a wide range of cultures, old age was (and still is) more likely to subject you to ridicule than to respect. If you were rich and powerful, the ridicule would be behind your back, unless you were nearly blind or deaf. Rollicking good fun was to be had by setting stumbling blocks before the blind or by shouting insults into the ears of the deaf. The biblical injunctions not to treat the halt, blind, and deaf to such abuse are not metaphors. These unfortunates were given no special privilege, unless it was a negative one. One chilling example: David, after having been mocked by the Jebusites who claimed they could beat him with their blind and lame, the Jebusite way of saying “with both hands tied behind our backs,” responds: “Whoever would smite the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack the lame and the blind, who are hated by David's soul” (2 Sam 5.8).⁴

The Jebusite blind and lame are about to find themselves props in David's cruel joke, whose wit is to force literalism upon Jebusite trash-talk metaphors. And while at it, why not trick a blessing from your blind old father, rendering him a fool and filling him with anguish? Little kids mocked old bald men who, if the particular bald man happened to have God on his side, could avenge himself by calling down two she-bears to maul the brats. Forty-two mischievous tykes of Jericho got eliminated that way, getting their comeuppance when the

⁴ See too the *Iliad* 1.599-600, where the gods laugh at Hephaestus for being a cripple. I generally quote from the King James' version (AV) of the bible, but on occasion from the Revised Standard Version (RSV) as here, and the Jewish Publication Society version (JPS), when it makes the point more accurately.

prophet Elisha decided their taunts regarding his baldness were not to be borne (2 Kings 2.23-24). What the crippled and blind, the old and bald, would not have given to have had Elisha's connections.

John of Trevisa, in a late fourteenth-century treatise discussing the ages of man, minces no words about *elde* (old age): "Everyone has contempt for the old person and is annoyed and bored by him" ("All men dyspyse þe olde persone and ben heuy⁵ and wery of hym").⁶ Consider yourself lucky, I guess; it is better to be old now than it ever was,⁷ not because you will not be despised and found to be a bore, but because there are drugs to alleviate much of the pain of your greater life expectancy, the internet to fill the emptier time, and old-age pensions, still possibly solvent if you do not linger too much longer, to keep you housed and fed.

Life is a desperate struggle not to be laughed at, sneered at, or looked down upon. It is next to impossible to cheat others of the small pleasures they achieve at your expense. Even if you accept being ignored, in fact seek to be ignored, you still risk ridicule. Minding your own business when you are old, ugly, deformed, seems to provoke little boys, and teen girls. They do not even have to be your own children, nor do they need to know you at all. No, I am not even close to paranoid. I hardly feel persecuted or singled out, nor am I. I am only growing old, and with it comes the disorientation of that kind of self-estrangement I last remember from puberty.

Say you are, as I am, in your sixties. We take it for granted that dividing up humanity by decadal age cohorts starting at thirteen, into teens, twenties, thirties, and so on, is a perfectly natural way to carve up a population. But making a plural of the multiples of ten to indicate an age cohort is not very old. True, we have girls referred to as in their teens as

⁵ The *Middle English Dictionary* glosses "heavy" in this passage as meaning annoyed, troubled, vexed, s.v. hevi, 5a. As to "wery of him," the sense is "bored by him"; see MED s.v. weri adj, 2b.

⁶ John of Trevisa's translation of *Bartholomaeus Anglicus: De proprietatib[us] rer[um]*, EEBO Reel position: image 94 of 522, Liber 6, c.1; cited in Aers, "The Christian Practice of Growing Old"; also see Burrow, *The Ages of Man* 88-89.

⁷ Thane makes this point convincingly in her review of historical writing on old age; "Social Histories of Old Age."

early as 1673, but for the other multiples nothing is recorded before the last third of the nineteenth century.⁸ Until then the plural of a multiple of ten was more likely to be used to refer to a decade in a century, and not before the eighteenth century at that. Marking age cohorts in this fashion is of an ilk with those older traditions that divided the “ages of man” variously into 3, 4, 6 and 7 stages.⁹

These older traditions of dividing up the course of life have been much studied in the past couple of decades. The schemas show wide variation. In John Burrow’s words: “anyone who goes to medieval discussions of the ages of man with the intention of ascertaining at what age youth was then thought to end, or old age to begin, will find no easy answer. The texts offer, indeed a bewildering profusion of different answers.”¹⁰ Old age can begin anywhere from 35 to 72.¹¹ In classical Rome, Livy calls Hannibal *senex* (old) when he is 44 while Cicero refers to himself as *adulescens* at that same age.¹² Cicero, though never short on self-serving estimations of himself, is 63 when he calls himself *adulescens* at 44, so there is some excuse. He may not have classified himself that way when he was 44.

Youthfulness is somewhat relative and the stage of life is partly in the eye of the beholder. My mother, who is a preternaturally fit 88, refers to her golfing partners as young (she still swims a half mile a day and plays eighteen holes whenever the weather does not prevent it). When I press her, she says they are 70. Middle age has been pushed back. 35 could qualify when I was a child and surely 40 would. Some say I am middle aged at 65, but that is because they are already 45 and have revised in a transparently self-interested way the ages of man, so that they do not yet have to understand themselves to be middle aged.¹³ Old age is pushed

⁸ OED s.v. teen, n.2.

⁹ On the ages of man in addition to Burrow, see Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man’s Life*; Sears, *The Ages of Man*.

¹⁰ Burrow, 34.

¹¹ See Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages* 15-17.

¹² Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World* 20-21.

¹³ See Cutler, et al, *American Perceptions of Aging* p. 17. Incredibly, 9 percent of those over 75 thought themselves young.

back even more forcefully by people already in it. More than half the people between the ages of 65-74 surveyed in a National Council on Aging study in 2002 thought of themselves as middle aged or young, as did a third of those over 75. Only the AARP¹⁴ pushes the other way, sending you membership solicitations when you reach 50. 70 is not young, for the bible tells me so, and 50 does not yet qualify as old except to people in their twenties and thirties. Yet strangely, the pictures of the boys and girls in my father's high school yearbook look to me like men and women. My dad going off to war looks like the man he was; in more than one way he was older at 23 than I am now.

Do not think because of miserable life expectancies that old people were a rare sight in ancient, medieval, or early modern times. The big culling took place in the first few years of life; in a population in which life expectancy at birth was 25 years, if you made it to 20, you could expect to get to 54, and if you made it to 40 you were likely to get to 63.¹⁵ One could expect 6-8 percent of the population to be over 60.¹⁶ Females stood a better chance at all ages than males, childbearing years notwithstanding. War, violence, and occupational accidents ensured that men died at slightly higher rates.

Even under the brutal demographic regimes that made surviving childhood a bet against unattractive odds, the notion of dying in childhood, or later, in the so-called middle of one's life—the very term “middle” indicating it was not properly an end—was thought unnatural. It was considered natural only to die in one's old age. In medieval times the law did not excuse people on account of age from the onerous legal obligations of attending courts, or from owing various services, military or otherwise, until they had reached 60, sometimes 70. Then as now, 60 often served as an excuse, and seldom as a

¹⁴ AARP is an acronym for the American Association of Retired Persons; the acronym is now the official name.

¹⁵ Coale-Demeny, 658, Model South, Level 3, Female; for Males the numbers are as usual slightly less generous, but only slightly, a year less expectancy at 20 and 40.

¹⁶ Thane, “Social Histories of Old Age,” 95, gives estimates in England for the seventeenth century and notes local variation depending on rates of mobility of the young.

qualification, as when it served as the minimum age for membership in the *gerousia*, the Spartan senate.¹⁷ Nowadays, we do not find it natural even to die in old age. It has become quite rare to hear that someone has died because they were old, and not from a more specific cause: cancer, diabetes, liver, heart, pancreas, brain failure. Rather than blame the czar, we blame his evil ministers.

I began writing this book in my 65th year. Some will say I am still too young to undertake this enterprise, that I am jumping the gun. They, I suspect, are patronizing me, and magically trying to keep their old age at bay by denying it to me. My fear is that if I delay much longer, I will be not be able to write it, or anything else; there is no stopping the downward slide. I am troubled about how and when to close up shop, about justifying my salary, which was hard enough to do when my wits were still there. Will I know when I am an embarrassment? Do my younger colleagues, sometimes very much younger, already know? Am I missing the hints they are sending my way?

A metaphorical gibbet casts a shadow over the discussions that follow as undeniable decline and incipient decrepitude force one into thinking about hanging it up. And images of hanging intrude whether I decide to hang in or hang on longer than I should, wearing out whatever welcome I may have once merited, oblivious to no longer measuring up. Beds also figure prominently in this book, for not only might you be put into one or be unable to get out of one, but you might actually choose to take to one. Sick beds and death beds are dense with meaning. How is one to go down: with all guns blazing, raging against the dying of the light, or in bitterness consumed by fantasies of revenge, or with whining and whimpering self-pity, or in garish self-abnegation as the renouncers of the *Upanishads*, or in apathy, whether abject blank dementia, or cold stoic firmness, or by simply becoming politely invisible? Will you retire in full exercise of your will, or will you gently, yet firmly, be escorted to an ice floe which thinned by global

¹⁷ See Shahar, *Growing Old* 25-26; Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England* 104-34; in Iceland a person over 70 was excused from fasting, *Grágás* Ia 35; see also n. 211.

warming will make death by drowning more likely than death by freezing?

Will anyone show up for your retirement dinner? Will you? Will your memory still be good enough to recall everyone who did *not* show up, so you can even up the score? But then how will you manage the revenge except by fantasy? Will you be able to come up with their names, should you manage to recall their faces? Why are you consumed with fears about that dinner some five years before it will take place no differently than you would lie awake at nights worrying about botching your Bar Mitzvah three years before you had to go on stage and man up in the Jewish way?

The you behind your eyes is out of date: a confession

Digression, cast adrift on the buoyant Dead Sea of your own narrations, is a sign of old age, and remarked by ancient moralists and proven by modern neurology and brain science to be a symptom of natural decay of the aging brain. Says John of Trevisa, old age is characterized by a “failyng of wyttes,”¹⁸ and the failing occurred, as far as we can tell, roughly at the same chronological age back in the old days as it does now. More of our ancient and medieval ancestors died before their brains had a chance to rot, but if they lived their old brains fared no worse than our old ones do. And though a higher percentage of us will make it to old age, we have been unable to budge the upper limit of the human lifespan ever since the Israelites entered Canaan after their forty years in the desert and mythical lifespans gave way to reality. An Eli the priest could still make it to 98, but Psalm 90 provides us with the famous and surprisingly just three score and ten, with another ten years of a misery bonus if you are in good shape: “The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.” A few, ever so few people, might make it to about 120, but that has been and still is the brick wall.

¹⁸ John of Trevisa, EEBO Reel position: image 94 of 522, Liber 6, c.1.

Take up with this again after I got sidetracked a few pages ago: You are in your 60s, even 50s, and you are walking by a shop window, or in some area in which a security monitor shows a scan of the line you are in. You see someone in the space where you should be but you do not recognize the interloper. After an unseemly lag of a second or two you are forced to remake your own acquaintance; it seems you no longer know yourself at first sight. The you behind your eyes assumes you look like you did twenty years ago, and that dated image, it believes, is the real you, even if recent photos tend to play practical jokes on you. Photos seldom confirmed your self perception, even when you were young, so you can dismiss the latest batch. In high school you only accepted one or two out of fifty on the contact sheet as satisfactory, though none of your friends or family, when asked, could distinguish the person in the photos you thought flattering from the many in which you looked like a total doofus. To them they were all indistinguishably you. They were not even putting you on, as you vainly believed, when they thought the best picture was one you cringed to think was you.

Now at age 65 you supply yourself with the appearance you will be accorded at judgment day. Theologians, among them St. Augustine, say you rise with your thirty-year-old body and looks, which approximates Paul's making the resurrected body match Christ's: "Until we all meet into the unity of faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4.13).¹⁹ The resurrection of the dead heels to our vanity.

One is tempted to suggest that the belief in the resurrection of the thirty-year-old body is a reflex of our inability to think of our real selves as the wretched old people we are destined to die as, if we are lucky enough to live so long. This inability extends to imagining ourselves as babies too. We are alienated, in different ways to be sure, both from the present real image of ourselves as old and from distant

¹⁹ See Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body* 98-99, 122n15. Augustine was inconsistent about whether we would come back with our 30-year-old form. If your body was deformed then you were to get a better one; *ibid.*, 29, 98n144; also see Burrow, 104. See further below p. 40.

images of ourselves before age four. Both are in some sense not us. The old us is made strange by the self-deception I am in the midst of discussing, while we are alienated from the infant us by our inability to remember, let alone imagine, what it was like to be that baby pictured in the family album. Whatever psychic mechanism allows us to have some sense of continuity of character with the kid sitting in the second-grade class picture does not extend to our one-year-old self.

What bodies are the staggering numbers of babies and toddlers who fell victim to the mortality tables to be provided with at the Last Judgment? Does the baby arise as a baby? Or with the body it would have had had it not been nipped in the bud? Opinions differed,²⁰ but the anonymous poet, desperate with longing, who, sometime in the second half of the fourteenth century, wrote the moving Middle English poem known as *Pearl* to mourn the death of his two-year-old daughter, sees her in a vision in heaven as a queen, a beautiful maiden, not as a toddler. Yet he is still able to recognize her as the precious pearl he has lost. She rather firmly reprimands her father that his grief is out of order, since she is now a bride of the Lamb. The narrator wants to be consoled by the vision, but it only ends in augmenting his sorrow and grief. The consolation that his faith offers him fails to console him.²¹ Some people, evidently, were unable to shrug off, or become inured to, the grim demographic realities of their world.

If we construct a fantasy of childhood as a time of an unalienated unity of being, then that sense of unity, the actual feeling of it, is not recoverable by memory, but must be accepted on faith, or by supposing it for our own children when they are happily (we think) lost in fantasy and play. But as soon as memories begin, so do memories of fear and

²⁰ See Bynum, *Resurrection*, who cites Origen: our resurrected bodies will be without age or sex, 67; Aphrahat: that body which is laid in earth, that very body shall rise again, 73; and Ephraim: we all rise as adults, 76.

²¹ See Aers's reading of *Pearl* in "The Self Mourning." The poem adopts much of the idiom of love poetry which cannot help but put the two-year old into a more marriageable body. Among us it is the other way around: the language of love turns the beloved from adult to a "babe" (mostly female) or "baby" (male or female). The *Pearl*-poet, however, embodies his metaphorical pearl as a woman, elegantly dressed, not as a toddler, even though she is not bearing her resurrected body, for which she must wait until Doomsday.

anxiety, of not fitting, of a vivid image of being mocked at age four in nursery school by a girl a year older because I dribbled chocolate milk all over my shirt.

I must say I do not know what older adults those so-called positive psychologists have been testing, who these researchers insist only remember pleasant feelings, no particulars mind you, just pleasant feelings from times long past.²² If not in childhood then never. Once our selves start to multiply in order to handle the various roles we are called on to play as moderately well-socialized actors, good-bye unity of being and lack of self-consciousness. I never felt I learned properly to play the role of a mature adult. I have tried to discuss interest rates as if knowledgeable about them; I tried to act upset over one of my kid's lousy grades. But I never felt one with the part. If I had a hard time adjusting to the roles demanded in the prime of life then what am I to do with old age?²³ Maybe playing the old man properly requires thinking you are twenty years younger than you are and acting the fool who thinks such. If that is the case, then my very failure to recognize myself in the shop window proved me perfectly immersed in the role of the old man I thought I wasn't.

But with recognition comes deflation and shame. You fear that others can see your pathetic vanity. Any minimally astute observer, such as one of your students, can see the pretense in the way you talk, or try to hold yourself, which you believe is ramrod straight, but the sag at the knees and the pain in your back betrays you. Yet that shame is also its own sort of vanity. It assumes people, younger people to be exact, are looking at you, or looking at you as anything but a 60 something, cancelled soul. As one female student told a female colleague of mine, which she, reveling in Schadenfreude, hastened to relay to me: "oh Professor Miller," the student told her, "he's such a cute old man." That was rather more painful than the confrontation with the shop window, though I still vividly remember when I was twenty how someone forty might as

²² See below p. 31.

²³ As Mary Dove, in her book on "the perfect age" in the ages-of-man traditions rightly observes: "it has always been easier to die in one's prime (or, in the language of earlier generations, in the perfection of one's age) than to be perceived to be living it"; Dove, 3.

well have been a member of a different species, or a shade in Charon's boat crossing over. The idea that such moribund souls could be objects of desire or have any themselves was a thought that was beyond my imaginative powers. And still mostly is. The student, and my colleague, were instruments of cosmic comic revenge, punishing me for having somewhat too good self-esteem, which like so much self-esteem had become quite unhinged from reality.

Comic for a while. Eventually the genre switches to horror. When you were a little kid, very little, four or five, the old were not cute, especially the very old. Grandparents were excepted, but it was an easy exception to make because they were only in their late forties. The very old, however, were images of death and blight and scared the bejesus out of you. One of my first memories was meeting an old withered soul from our small synagogue in Green Bay in the grocery store and tearfully asking my mother when we escaped if that would happen to me too. The wrinkles, the blotched skin, the gnarled hands that reached to pat my head, the wart with a hair like dog's whisker sticking out of it—little kids see the world as Gulliver saw it in Brobdingnag—the thick glasses that monstrously magnified the eyes, the goiter on the neck.

I am not quite there yet. Even the shop window did not disconfirm that. The genre I live in is still broad comedy. I get laughed at by my teenage boys when, after having tortured myself on the cross-country ski machine in the basement, I trundle back upstairs shirtless and there is a girl friend there. More than enough embarrassment for all concerned, enough for all but the girl friend to make awkward jokes about. It will only get worse when the jokes stop and I become an object of horror to little kids—with my shirt on.

I get angry when my wife or kids tell me that they responded to my question and that I just did not hear the answer. Am I getting hard of hearing too? More likely they are disdainful to answer and falsely claiming that I did not hear. But that is what my truly hard of hearing mother thinks too. I still don't believe them. About my hearing there is some doubt, about their treating me as an annoyance is certain. Lately, though, I do notice that when speaking with students I find myself leaning too close, violating their personal space,

using up my one allowable “what,” then hastily jerking back while taking a stab at a sensible response only to burden them with what turns out to be a *non sequitur*.²⁴

Yet within hours of the encounter with your reflection, even as few as five minutes, you have, I bet, reconstituted the false you, so recently exposed as a delusion. You would need the uncompromising eye of Rembrandt to keep seeing yourself as others see you. As long as that false you knows its place, and does not make any embarrassing demands on others to confirm overtly its truth, you are welcome to your vanity. You might, for an instant, feel a fool for having your self-conception so divorced from reality, yet you can always find a support group ready to congratulate you for not giving in to ageism, to “socially-constructed” categorizations unfavorable to your deluded upbeat view of yourself.²⁵ And worries on this score cease altogether once you bottom out in true dementia, as in the case of Alzheimer’s patients, who neither recognize their written name nor know what they presently look like and are thus unable to find their way back to their rooms when meandering the nursing-home corridor unless there is a picture of themselves outside the room, for they do not recall the room number either. Not just any picture will work though. The person captured in a recent photo would be a stranger, unrecognizable, but put up a picture taken in their forties, the prime of their lives, and they know the room is theirs. Eventually, it seems, you lose the capacity to be embarrassed

²⁴ The ability to pick up the microseconds of difference in the onset of voicing that allows one to distinguish pill from Bill, cod from God, tick from dick, decreases with age; see discussion in Burke and Shafto, “Language and Aging,” 387, citing Strouse, et al. See also Tremblay, et al., 1865: “Results show that older adults had more difficulty than younger listeners discriminating voice-onset contrasts. In addition, these same speech stimuli evoked abnormal neural responses in older adults.”

²⁵ As an example of work of this sort, see Featherstone and Hepworth, “Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life.” Notice “later life” as a euphemism for old age. See also Rowe and Kahn, *Successful Aging*, who advocate staying spunky, thinking positively, and then dropping dead quickly when, I guess, thinking positively succumbs to reality. I have also never understood academics who seem to think that because something, say anti-Semitism, is socially constructed that it is less real than if it were a feather or a stone.

by the self-serving image the you behind your eyes thinks is you.

We look at ourselves in the mirror every morning without it producing much anxiety. The mirror was much more dangerous when you were fourteen and a giant zit had erupted on your forehead hours before the Friday dance. So why the shock of the shop window? Because we are ready for the mirror in the morning, it being a ritual we perform on autopilot. The task at hand occupies us; shaving, or combing hair, should there be any. We make sure only to see the part addressed. The stakes are very low, though not so low that I have not taken to shaving in the shower sans mirror. If we must confront the whole countenance we put on a game face. We have taught ourselves to see, not us, but our mirror face, a creature with its own independent existence, like the picture in our high school yearbook which is no less otherly, unreal, and out of date.

That mirror face is seen through a lattice of conventions that makes it not seen for what it is. The hair growing from the top of your ear that you cannot believe you had not noticed earlier, it being at least a quarter inch-long, remains nothing more than a momentary annoyance before you shave it off, cutting the ear in the process, unable to stop the bleeding because of the anti-coagulant effect of the 81mg dose of aspirin you take so that you can—the joke of it—live longer. The shop window, though, catches us unawares, even if we were sneaking a look into it, which, it seems, is an undignifying habit we never quite outgrow.

Others serve as truer mirrors that force upon us these abrupt realizations of our own decline. Can it be that your high-school friend looks so terribly old? Wasn't he a year behind me? The theme is treated in exquisite detail by Proust, and much earlier and briefer by Seneca who, when seeing an old slave at the entrance to one of his estates he had not visited in years, asks the bailiff the identity of the "broken-down dotard." The slave answers: "Don't you know me, sir? I am Felicio; you used to bring me little images. My father was

Philositus the steward, and I am your pet slave.” Seneca has no defense against the truth that that pet slave represents.²⁶

The shame. Shame seems to crop up in everything I write: humiliation, fears of exposure, the anxieties that attend the simplest interactions—blowing a routine handshake—or the torment of replaying those interactions afterward. Honor is always at stake and always being lost or threatened in the most routine of interactions. And with honor and its discontents come revenge, or fantasies of it. But what revenges can there be at my age? It is too early to write people in and out of wills, assuming that after I have finished paying and paying for my children’s near-eternal educations, and for their pursuit of non-remunerative dreams after they graduate, there will be anything that is worth depriving anyone of or to take with me when I go.

²⁶ Seneca, Epistle 12, I.65-67; discussed in Parkin, 69-70.

Blanking

As easy as it is to self-deceive about what you look like, it is much harder to self-deceive in other domains. If you were once a swimmer, golfer, or runner, the stopwatch or scorecard tells a truth that cannot be blinked away. Some sports make self-deception somewhat easier to sustain: thus those football players who do not know when to quit and have to be cut. But what about those professors who, like me, cannot be cut? Tenure and age discrimination laws let us keep working, which somehow does not seem the right word, if it ever was.

How do we self-deceive about our declining mental skills, our failing memory, our inability to come up with anything new to say? What of decaying scholarly capacities? Of not keeping up, of not being able to focus attention on the latest article in the various fields you try to stay moderately current in, of being unable to continue learning, or if able, then unable to retain what you have recently learned? Can I ever get lost in a book again without my mind wandering? I have always been suspicious of those parents who claim that their dull normal and badly behaved children really are geniuses suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder and need to be dosed with Ritalin, but now it seems, in some kind of poetic justice, that I have ADD, the only difference being that I really have it. My doctor actually prescribed Ritalin for me, which, as it turned out, was not covered by my health insurance for anyone over 18. Not willing to pay the unsubsidized price, my avarice, itself an attribute of old age, has kept me Ritalin-free.

Everything distracts me. Being interested in something has become unmoored from my ability to attend to it. Ambient noise, intrusive trivial thoughts, email, stock prices, Green Bay Packer blogs, variously and predictably plague me.²⁷ Ambient quiet is distracting too and sent me to the internet to buy a white-noise machine. I interrupted the writing of this paragraph to play a game of Solitaire, and then when I lost, I

²⁷ See Kramer and Madden, "Attention."

allowed myself to play until I won, and then one more in case I won two in a row, and then I kept on until I won two in a row. Says the ancient rabbinical *Pirke Avot, The Ethics of the Fathers*, nearly 1900 years ago, “If a man is walking by the way and is studying and then interrupts his study and exclaims: ‘How beautiful is this tree? How beautiful is this plowed furrow?’ Scripture considers it is regarded as if he has forfeited his life (or as if he bears guilt for his soul).”²⁸ If the beauties of nature cannot justify distraction what of Solitaire? My offense is (*as if*) capital; if I could only remember which circle of hell awaits me. My will, an element of my name no less, never strong to begin with, has become weaker, pretty near will-less. The “I am” that remains in *William* is a mockery. If William James is right, and I find that he usually is, then I am in trouble: “*The essential achievement of the will, in short, when it is most ‘voluntary,’ is to attend to a difficult object and hold it fast before the mind*” (italics in original).²⁹

Has Nemesis gotten even with me for the contempt I did not quite disguise for the dead wood of twenty years ago, by making me dead wood in the eyes of my younger colleagues? You see them, don’t you, giving signals that they want to break off the conversation you are holding them to almost out of spite, but desperately too, telling them, oh, just one more thing, but talking faster as a concession to your perceiving in some primitive part of your brain that you are boring them silly, which they can perceive that you can perceive and so on in an infinite regress. You even find yourself following them down the hall as they head for the hills, still chattering at them, self-destructively unable to break off.

The question is the state of your mind; is it still good enough? You fear you are losing it. You give voice to your concerns, lamenting the decay of memory, the inability to find simple nouns like refrigerator or litter box as your spouse impatiently tries to hurry you through your lexicon by gesturing with her hand in that way that says “get on with it.”

²⁸ *Pirkei Avot*, 3.9. The Hebrew is variously translated in English harshly, “Scripture regards him as having forfeited his life,” “is endangering his life,” or more leniently: “regards him as if he were guilty against himself.” The study that is being interrupted is of Scripture or the Mishnah.

²⁹ James, *Psychology* 417.

That hand gesture registers more contemptuous impatience than any impatient words could ever show.

There is no small amount of self-flattery in the lament of losing it: it claims you once had it to lose. Have you inflated your own past abilities? Complaining about how much “it” you have lost is a claim to a reasonably worthy past and an attempt to claim such former heights that even if you have begun your descent from the summit you are still sneaking in a claim to being plenty high in absolute terms.

But unless you are one of those insufferable souls with self-esteem of such quality that no disconfirming evidence, no matter how devastating, can dent it, or unless you are already well embarked on dementia, these delusions about our minds are harder to maintain than the falsehoods we maintain about our appearance. You get caught once too often having forgotten things that are shameful for someone in your specialty not to have at your beckon. You fear too that you may be pretending to have once known it, that in fact you have forgotten nothing. Claiming forgetfulness is a way, pathetic as it is, of saving face. Where once you could blame things on drink, you now blame them on inevitable decline, and on having sampled a few sips of the River Lethe. (Drink, whether from rivers or bottles, figures in many myths of memory and forgetfulness.) In the questioning after a public lecture, you find yourself unable to deny that the questioner is thinking better about your stuff than you are. You tell yourself: at least I am still shameable. I can still recognize when someone is a whole lot sharper than I am. How many clowns in my racket can be skewered by a questioner’s comments and not even know they were shown up for frauds and fools? But that ungenerous thought, despite its truth, dares the gods to make me one of them, if they have not done so already without my knowledge.

Being bested, even on your own turf, happened when you were younger too; big deal, that is part of learning. The shame it caused spurred you to learn more, to do better. But when it starts to happen more frequently than is seemly the earth beneath you no longer seems so firm, and your confidence starts to wane. You find yourself stuttering, losing track of your train of thought, just plain blanking.

A runner or a swimmer can prove exactly how much his or her abilities have decayed; so too there are ways of measuring the decay of mental abilities, even if not quite stopwatch accurate. Things just do not happen as quickly in my brain as they once did. Always a slow reader, I could count on about thirty pages an hour for a novel I was not distracted from. Now it is twenty-five if I can stay focused, but the distractions are more frequent too, so that the real rate is closer to twenty pages. I have to look up Old Norse and Old English words that ten years ago I did not have to look up.³⁰ I cannot add, subtract, divide or multiply numbers without writing them down, something that used not to be the case. Just yesterday I struggled figuring out the crew size of a Venetian transport in the Fourth Crusade when the book I was reading claimed that the 200 Venetian ships requisitioned would need a crew of 27,000 to man them. This sounded high and I figured it must have mistakenly included the troops, but I needed a pen and paper to write out $27000/200$ and then cancel out the zeroes to figure out the average per ship. I cannot remember the scholarship I dutifully read the past two weeks, let alone two months ago. Though most of it was eminently forgettable I also cannot recall the most gruesomely lurid of accounts in a medieval chronicle that I did not think I would need to take notes on because I could trust myself never to forget something that perversely entertaining.

The slowing-down seems to mimic in many respects the mechanics of conversing in a foreign language, one that you are not able to think in, and so must translate in a race against time into English what your interlocutor is saying to you in French so that you can respond. I now find myself conscious that I am translating English into itself before I understand what is being said. By the time I have parsed the first part of the sentence being dully intoned, I have already missed the next part. Maybe it is not my memory that is at fault, but rather that the processing speed of all my mental functions is slowing down. It is as if I were driving through an infinitely

³⁰ For convenient summaries of the psych research on various types of memory decline see Hoyer and Verhaeghen, "Memory Aging"; also Thornton and Light, "Language Comprehension and Production in Normal Aging," 264; Burke and Shafto, "Language and Aging," 397-99.

long school crossing zone that no one else is stuck in.³¹ By the time I have figured out what was said it is already seven seconds too late to figure out where the speaker actually went with it. You feel every couple of minutes that you got plunked down *in medias res*, in the middle of things, yet again, wondering what had happened and is happening.

Forgetting the present as it happens

Worse still, I cannot remember what I have written, whether perhaps I have not published this very paragraph somewhere. Self-plagiarism does explain the extraordinary productivity of a few well-known academics; why should I be any different, except for the well-known part? Didn't I already say that in my *Faking It* book? I do have my hobbyhorses. Revenge and humiliation are themes that seem to be ever present in my writing, and I do discuss some of the same cases more than once because I have found none better to illustrate the point.

I just stopped typing and started to get out of my chair because I had formed the intention to ... I forgot what I was getting up to do. Was I going to check *Faking It*? Then why would I have started to get up since I have a searchable version on my hard-drive? Was I going to look up a word in the Latin dictionary, or the Norse one? If I were, the thought that I might have been thus embarked does not prompt a rediscovery of the intention. I am certain that I did form an intention. That much I know. There is some good evidence. I made small initiatory movements to carry it out—I stopped typing, I started from my chair, and I am consumed with a panicky sense of being stuck in a kind of satanically inverted *Amazing Grace*: I once was found but now I'm lost; I could see but now I'm blind.

This total loss of an intention is more unsettling than the more frequent failure that kicks in a little later in the unfolding

³¹ For arguments that failures in attention should be linked to declines or failures in working memory see, e.g., McVay and Kane. But it may be that working memory is suffering from the effects of declines in general processing speed and failures of inhibitory mechanisms, rather than failures in memory per se; see MacDonald and Christiansen, "Reassessing Working Memory," and Kramer and Madden, "Attention."

of an intentional action you are already well in the midst of. When that happens, I know there was a word I meant to look up or a book I meant to pull from the shelf, but I forgot which word or which book. Those forgettings usually come back to me eventually, or so I think. This sort of lapse seems to be happening more often too, and I now consider them of minor moment if I recover the goal within a few seconds, successfully pulling Eurydice back from oblivion. At least in these kinds of forgetting I know the rough domain of my intention: some word or some book. But this time the blank is blanker, for I have no clue what I roughly intended at all, only that I intended something.

This kind of failure is not like those dully common failures of forward memory that seem more frequent among teenagers than among sexagenarians: forgetting to discharge a duty or to do a chore that must be fulfilled sometime in the near future. My youngest son will sometimes forget to walk the neighbor's dog, though it is his job to do so daily, more often than I forget a doctor's appointment. But I did forget to give the dog her arthritis pill last night, and that was not the first time. It seems that as I head for the infancy of old age I have already reached the teenage level on my return trip back to diapers.³²

I suppose I can take some consolation from these unnerving failures to remember an intention within seconds of forming it that I am hyperaware of the blank, that it torments me. Were the erasure so complete as to keep me blithely unaware that I had even formed an intention in the first place, I would be embarked on Herr Alzheimer's ship of fools. Maybe, even more horrifically, I never had an intention, but only the illusion of one, the illusion taking the form of the panicky sensation of blanking. I cannot accept that or I would be in chains in the lordly lofts of Bedlam. What in hell did I get up to do? I have not a clue, and it never came back to me either. But then I cannot be certain that it did not come back,

³² For a provocatively informative article exploring the relation between cognitive development in early life and its decline and unwinding from mid to late life, with a suitably guarded view that still manages to give real punch to the notion of old age as a second childhood, see Craik and Bialystok, 557-601.

only that if it did, I did not recognize it as the intention that I had lost.³³

So what, you say. How many times as a teenager did you open the door of the refrigerator and stare in, not having a clue as to why you were there or whether even it was food you were looking for and not your baseball glove? But there's a difference. In those refrigerator trips you recalled the lost intention and, importantly, you also recognized it as the one you had blanked on when it came back.

These kinds of failures share a family resemblance with another kind of failure: blanking on names or words. This seems to be a special curse for sexagenarian teachers who fail to find the names of even the most intelligent and attractive of their students at moments when it is apparent to them and everyone else that you blanked. As William James pointed out, ever so perfectly, that blank is not just a formless blank. It has a shape: "a sort of wraith of the name is [in the gap], beckoning us in a given direction, making us at moments tingle with the sense of our closeness, and then letting us sink back without the longed-for term."³⁴ Much the same with the wraith of a lost intention. A small vertigo sets in. With a name or a noun you cannot come up with, you might run through the alphabet hoping that with the first letter the rest will fill itself out. This may work for a lost word, but not for recovering that fleeting intention that just slipped through the widening cracks in my consciousness.

Nor is the story just one of forgetfulness triumphing over memory. The productive capacity to forget is decaying too. Forgetting comes in more than a few flavors;³⁵ some of them

³³ I am not alone; this is one of the many failures in cognition that provably attend old age; see Einstein, et al., "Prospective Memory and Aging"; McDaniel, et al. "Aging and Maintaining Intentions."

³⁴ James, *Psychology* 163. Recent studies have expanded on James's insight regarding tip of the tongue experiences, or TOT: "In the throes of TOT, a person can produce semantic and grammatical information about the TOT target, but only partial information about the phonology of the word" and then "older adults rate word finding failures as a cognitive problem that is most frequent, most affected by aging and the most annoying," Burke and Shafto, 399, citing the relevant studies; also see Thornton and Light, 264-66. TOT, unsurprisingly, has been shown to be more frequent in old than in the young.

³⁵ See Nietzsche's classic observations on forgetting in *Genealogy of Morals* 2.1: "Forgetting is no mere *vis inertiae* as the superficial imagine; it is

quite beneficent, like the ability to inhibit memories irrelevant to the task at hand that intrude and disrupt it, or the ability to forget insults or disses, or hated songs. For those things my memory is acuter than it ever was. It helps explain my late-onset ADD.

Fishing for compliments or begging for reassurance

Again, how am I to know if I am exaggerating the decline so as to reinvent a false past? At the end of one's career one is asked to give talks on topics one wrote about fifteen or twenty years ago. To prepare, I re-read my past writing on the theme, hoping to reawaken, or to ram back in, the knowledge I had back then. Re-reading one's own work is a fraught experience. I lose either way: if I feel a surge of pride—"wow, Miller, the muse was really singing when you wrote this"—no more than two seconds into indulging a fantasy of posthumous glory or even of belated present acclaim, my daydream crashes into the sea so suddenly that the oxygen masks don't have time to drop down. Surely the tawdry fantasy shows my judgment is a gross flatterer not to be trusted, so gross that it cannot sustain itself before my more objective self deflates it. Thus chastened, should I reexamine the work and conclude yet again that it is verifiably inspired and ever so unjustly ignored, then I despair that I could write anything approaching it today. I cannot remember that I ever knew the things I was talking about in that book. Wherever did I come up with that example to make my point? I would not even know where to look to find it now, even with the Google crutch, available now, but not then.

More frequently, however, my reaction is this: no pride at all, just a sickening recognition of mediocrity and superficiality. I hope no one has read it, a hope that has pretty much been fulfilled, unlike most hopes. Presumably the dean hadn't; all he cared about was that it got published. This second reaction rings truer than the one celebrating my own

rather an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression." Well yes and no, the ability to inhibit intrusive thoughts, to forget them for the nonce is clearly a positive faculty when it works to exclude the irrelevant from interfering with a present task, but there is little value to forgetting when what you have forgotten is precisely what is needed to carry out the present task.

genius. The mind on display in my old prose looks much like the drivel I fear I am reproducing this very moment, though I had more facts at my fingertips to draw on then, facts that are now beyond my grasp. I know too that I should trust the negative judgment because negative judgments that can survive our tendency to self-flatter are more likely to be true than positive ones, or as La Rochefoucauld put it: “our enemies get closer to the truth in their judgment of us than we get ourselves.”³⁶

Like that shop window that forced upon me a moment of painful truth, so too surprise attacks of painful truth occur in one’s professional life. Nature holds up a mirror before you and a sickening feeling consumes you. One reads the work of some fellow medievalists, friends in fact, and its excellence reveals to you with painful clarity your own shortcomings, your corner-cutting, your lack of gravitas, without gravitas bearing the sense of dull pomposity, but rather an enviable refusal on their part to dishonor their subject matter by making themselves, their anxieties about their relationship to it, even minutely their theme. They are simply medievalists and scholars, needing no genre-mixing to provide a defense against failing at the real game of scholarship by claiming to be playing a game half-way between essayist and historian, a law prof to historians, a historian to law profs, a half-baked moral psychologist to both, a jack of a middling number of trades to flit among so that you can always claim, when challenged, that you are not really in *that* field.

You do not, however, completely trust such negative judgments either, for you are not sure you wholly believe them. You surely do not believe them with all thine heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might, in the idiom of Deuteronomy. These painful self-castigations, like painful knowledge of the shop window, decay quickly or are shunted aside again and again. Merely to state them, and publicize them, is to fish for a compliment, to seek reassurances.

I am, I think, excruciatingly aware of the ironies of beginning a work on rituals of retirement, on the consciousness of one’s own decline, on complaining about old

³⁶ Maxim 458.

age, on how and when to shuffle off, with what in effect is a ritual of self-abnegation. Should the fished-for compliment not be granted, if the begged-for reassurance is not proffered? Then these essays will have run afoul of the imitative fallacy, which holds that you should not be boring when writing about boredom, or stupid when writing about stupidity. If one has lost it, one should not write about losing it. You do not want the proof of your fears showing up in the pudding.

Yet this half-posed self-abnegation I am indulging for the last few pages is more than a vulgar fishing expedition. It is also meant to work some magic. By claiming more decay than may have actually set in, or by owning up to what has set in, I hope to ward off more, and perhaps reclaim some ground already lost. The gods will reward my self-flagellation, the modest stripes of blood on my back, for not presuming on their beneficence. By counting chickens of negative value before they hatch, you expect to trick the gods into treating you better than they are certain to had you counted unhatched chickens of positive value, where you can rest assured they will take a hostile interest in your presumption, and kill the chicks or smash the eggs.

Q.E.D.

Jan. 13, 2010: I am defending to a colleague the wisdom of the police rounding up the usual suspects.

Me: Claude Rains was being more than a mere cynic, which of course he was also being, when he said “round up the usual suspects” because the usual suspects were not innocent but the known criminals of whatever the city was, Tangiers, Marrakesh, I forget which.

Colleague: Casablanca.

Me: I am going to go shoot myself.³⁷

³⁷ Conversation with Professor Doug Kahn, who is ten years older than I am.

Sackcloth and Ashes: Complaining against the Most High

This chapter deals with more formalized complaints about losing it, but the “it” that is lost are not brain functions and physical strength. They are about getting back what you are owed. Specifically the problem is how to compel a person to repay a debt or to deliver on a promise he has made. It is more like filing a formal legal complaint or going to what used to be the complaint window in the department store. The “it” in this kind of losing is concrete.

What though if the person we have a complaint against is a big man, your king, your lord, a saint, or the Lord Himself, and not just a friend or family member? What means—legal, psychological, social—can you, a lowly common soul, muster to gain your ends? What can you do to get a really big guy, like God, to remember his covenant, whether it be to defend you against invasion from Assyria, Babylon, or to protect you from your neighbors down the street in Kiev, York, Mainz, Lodz, Seville, Buenos Aires? The complainant need not be old, just weak, but since the old were inevitably that, this chapter can claim its proper place in this book. I envisage my archetypal complainant as old and broken: Priam before Achilles, Lear before his daughters, and in the saga word, old Thorbjorn, poor, half-blind, trying to get someone to take up his case against the man who senselessly killed his son.

Groveling with a punch

There is a close connection between penitential rituals of self-abnegation, like fasting, donning sackcloth, defacing oneself with dirt and ashes, rending one’s garments or flesh, and a not so vague attempt to force the hand of the person one grovels before. One seeks to shame him into fulfilling his promises or into doing his duty by ostentatiously degrading oneself in his presence.

Groveling of this sort, bowing and scraping, even when merely a simple greeting to one of superior station, was, along with harems and “Asiatic despotism,” how most western children, by age twelve, imagined the East. No need to read

the Amarna Letters: *1001 Nights* for children, with an assist from the bible did the trick. And if the child checked a real petition to Pharaoh or to a Mesopotamian king he would find that they began with “flopping formulae”:³⁸ “[I] am the dirt at your feet and the ground you tread on, the chair you sit on and the footstool at your feet. I fall at the feet of the king, my lord, the Sun of the dawn, seven times and seven times.”³⁹ Unfashionable as it has been to say since the appearance of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, the twelve-year old’s view was not unjustified.

All cultures must have rituals of self-abnegation, or, for instance, there would be no apology. And I venture to claim that human society is unimaginable without apology. Still, some cultures go in for more lurid versions of abnegation than others and extend the domains well beyond apology in which it is appropriate to engage in abnegation. Certain religious systems generate ostentatious forms of asceticism, others do not. Certain hierarchical cultures make garish groveling fairly routine, others would be disgusted by it. The contrast between, say, segments of Hindu culture and the roughly egalitarian saga Icelanders could not be greater, nor for that matter the difference in proper displays of deference to Sennacherib of Assyria compared to those due Henry II Plantagenet of England, or what any Herr Professor Doktor at a German university expects from his students and what I get from mine.

But it was not all risk-free for the person who got to use you as his foot stool. The dirt beneath the feet sometimes has a trick or two up its sleeve. The groveler could waft a whiff of threat. Appearing in the midst of Psalm 6, a complaint to the Lord to heal the psalmist of the illness that threatens his life, and to save him from his foes too, the psalmist shifts gears for one verse and explains to the Lord why it might be a good idea for Him to heed his plea:

³⁸ More formally known as obeisance formulae but thus termed by Schniedewind and Hunt jocularly importing “flopping formula” from theoretical physics, but eminently suitable for the Near Eastern epistolary style; see *A Primer on Ugaritic* 44.

³⁹ *Amarna Letters*, EA 195.

For in death there is no remembrance of Thee: in Sheol who can give Thee praise? (6.5, RSV)⁴⁰

The latent threat is quite unnerving, almost blasphemous in its implications. Nor is the threat much veiled: Lord, if you don't heal me, if you do not rescue me, if you let me die, you, oh Lord, will die with me, for in death there is no remembering thee. Moreover (as indicated in other psalms),⁴¹ my enemies are my enemies because of my devotion to you. It is on account of You that I am afflicted. So let me remind You: You need me as much as I need you.⁴²

One would think Psalm 6 would be hidden in a closet somewhere, but in the Jewish liturgy it features prominently in a portion of the daily morning and afternoon service called Tachanun, meaning supplication, a formal assuming of the submissive before God.⁴³ In fact, Tachanun has an alternate name, *Nefillat 'payim*, which in Hebrew means “falling on one's face,” literally on one's nose or nostrils, groveling in the ancient Near Eastern style.⁴⁴ Three years ago when I began saying Kaddish, the traditional mourning prayer, for my father, I was startled to find Psalm 6 just a couple of pages before the Kaddish. (I was something of an innocent about the liturgy of the daily service until my father's death brought me to it.) There I was threatening God, in the persona of the psalmist of Psalm 6, which threat I was to follow shortly thereafter with magnifying and sanctifying His Name which

⁴⁰ RSV; see also Pss. 30, 88.11-12.

⁴¹ E.g., Ps. 22.6-8.

⁴² Similarly, this Hittite prayer issues a pointed reminder that the gods themselves will die of starvation if they do stop the plague:

O gods, What is this that you have done? You have allowed a plague into Hatti, and the whole of Hatti is dying. No one prepares for you the offering bread and the libation anymore. The plowmen who used to work the fallow fields of the gods have died, so they do not work or reap the fields of the gods. The grinding women who used to make the offering bread for the gods have died, so they do not make the god's offering bread any longer.

“Mursili's Hymn and Prayer to the Sun-goddess of Arinna” (CTH 376.A), §6, Singer, 52.

⁴³ Tachanun, a couple of pages long, is said most weekdays but is suspended on certain holidays. Psalm 6 also figures prominently in Christian penitential devotion it being the first of the seven penitential psalms.

⁴⁴ See Figure 6, p. 271.

constitutes the entire substance of the mourner's Kaddish prayer: "Magnified and sanctified be God's great name...."⁴⁵

The pure praise-prayer, the Kaddish, shares much genetic material with rituals of obeisance that are meant to constrain the selfsame Mighty One you are groveling before. Prayers of praise paint God into a corner, and are often meant to do just that. Praise constrains its object when delivered down the hierarchy. Any teacher or parent knows that. Praise, to be sure, can be heartfelt at the moment delivered, but that does not mean it cannot also be part of a general strategy to get a child to do what you want by tilling the ground for future rituals of shaming him, when he is less inclined to do praiseworthy actions. Praise can also work quite well up the hierarchy, hence the consistent and lamentable success of sucking up and flattery, always hard, if not impossible, to distinguish from praise.

Kaddish and Psalm 6 work together in a world of shaming, as a kind of good cop, bad cop, to make the deity more compliant. Moreover, it hardly needs saying that context can shift a prayer of praise into one of admonition, into a "friendly reminder." Saying Kaddish, sanctifying God's name, as one is marched into a gas chamber means what exactly? One might discern a latent blasphemy in the term "Kiddush ha-shem" (sanctifying the Name) as the Jewish term for martyrdom. Is there not implicit in that sanctification a blame, a shaming? Can it not be read as showing up God for not showing up? From a Jewish Chronicle recording the pogroms

⁴⁵ The Mourner's Kaddish is as follows. Its most surprising feature is that there is not a mention of the dead person or of death:

Magnified and sanctified be God's great name in the world which He created according to His will. May he establish His kingdom during our lifetime and during the lifetime of Israel. Let us say, Amen.

May God's great name be blessed forever and ever.

Blessed, glorified, honored and extolled, adored and acclaimed be the name of the Holy One, though God is beyond all praises and songs of adoration which can be uttered. Let us say, Amen.

May there be peace and life for all of us and for all Israel. Let us say, Amen.

Let He who makes peace in the heavens, grant peace to all of us and to all Israel. Let us say, Amen.

in the Rhineland at the outset of the First Crusade (anno 1096), we find:

They were killed and slaughtered for the unity of the revered and awesome Name... Were there ever a thousand one hundred sacrifices on one day, all of them like the sacrifice of Isaac the son of Abraham? For one the world shook, when he was offered up on Mount Moriah, as is said: "Hark! The angels cried aloud." The heavens darkened. What has been done this time? "Why did the heavens not darken?"...when one thousand one hundred holy souls were killed and slaughtered on one day, on the third day of Sivan, a Tuesday—infants and sucklings who never transgressed ... "At such things will you restrain yourself, O Lord?"⁴⁶

Are lords shameable by mere peons? Yahweh, as hot-tempered as he is, is not shameless. He is at times portrayed as having his honor to defend, not just against mere mortals but against other gods he is competing with. More than a few psalms follow Moses's lead by invoking the incentives of this competitive world the gods play in to get God to do one's bidding. Says Moses:

Let not your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt... Let not the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth."... Remember Your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven." (Ex. 32.11-13 JPS)⁴⁷

Moses argues two points in his appeal: one depends on God's sense of competitiveness with other gods whose adherents threaten to gloat at his expense, the other to his sense of duty to fulfill his covenant with the patriarchs, and his people. Each point presumes God has a sense of shame, and each is directed to different aspects of it, one to his

⁴⁶ Chazan, 255-56.

⁴⁷ See also variously those Psalms in which the psalmist contends with God: Pss. 13, 25, 42, 42, 44, 73-4, 80, 89.

competitors—other gods—one to his clients, his people, his covenantees.

If God has his honor to defend, then shaming rituals should work on him. Thus time and again He is called upon, by those addressing him in supplication, to *remember* his covenant. The notion of remembering in the Hebrew Bible, especially when coupled with covenant (or Sabbath) as its object, need not refer to the mental state of calling up an image from the past. “Remember” is rather a richly obligational term, a legal term.⁴⁸ “To remember” means to fulfill a duty one is obligated to perform. And not just in the bible: “Remember me,” says the ghost in his charge to Hamlet to avenge him, revenge being the primal covenantal obligation. In our usual sense of remembering, Hamlet is completely consumed by remembering the burden the ghost lays on him, but that is not what the ghost means when he says remember, and thus the ghost returns to chide Hamlet’s forgetfulness.⁴⁹ The ghost uses remember to mean to be mindful of a duty *by discharging it*. And the same is true with many uses of the word remember in the Hebrew Bible. Even today, I can be said not to have remembered a debt I owe if I do not pay it back, regardless of how much I actually may be thinking about the debt and how I can avoid paying it.

Humiliating the Torah

In Palestine sometime after the autumn holiday of Sukkot, the festival of booths or tabernacles, God promises rain, and if He reneges, He will be called to account. In the Talmud tractate devoted to fasts, *Ta’anit*, one finds a ritual designed to prompt tardy rains to relieve a drought. A series of three fasts is decreed, then another set of three slightly more rigorous fasts should no rains have come. If still no rain, seven days of fasting is ordered, but here the ritual is ratcheted up with a

⁴⁸ See Weinfeld, 193. So too the notion of forgetting in the Hebrew Bible does not so much reference the mental state of forgetfulness as it marks a covenant violation, especially in cases of apostasy, and idolatry; e.g., Judges 3.7, also Ps. 44.18 (Eng. 44.17); Weinfeld, 197.

⁴⁹ See my discussion of remembrance in *Hamlet in Eye for an Eye*, 95-99.

novel addition:⁵⁰ “they carry the ark out to the open area of town, and they place burnt ashes on the ark, and on the head of the Nasi (the leader and chief elder), and on the head of the president of the court, and each and everyone else places ashes on his head.”⁵¹

The elder is to preach words of admonishment, referencing the successful repentance of the people of Nineveh in Assyria after Jonah prophesied doom to them. The congregation is then to be led in prayer not by the usual prayer leader but by a man called on especially for the occasion, who “is well versed in prayers and who has children and whose house is empty, so that his heart will be perfect in prayer.” This is a drought and the stakes are high; they want someone who will mean it when he prays, not the usual racing through the prayers at the speed of light.⁵² His desperate poverty means, the rabbis suspect, that he will be no less sincere in prayer than is the psalmist is when surrounded by his enemies.

One sage, Rabbi Zera, admits his distress witnessing the ritual: “At first when I would see the Rabbis placing burned ashes on the ark, my entire body would tremble.” In that trembling is an indication that, at some level of his consciousness, he recognizes that the Torah is being shamed, humiliated, threatened, and indeed punished. The Torah is being forced to grovel. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi is slightly more circumspect when answering the question “why do we carry the ark out to the open area of the town?: ‘We had a hidden utensil, and it was put to shame on account of our

⁵⁰ This passage is in the Mishneh. The Talmud is made up of the Mishneh, a compendium of the oral rabbinic law, compiled roughly between the first century BC and 200 AD, and the Gemara, which is a commentary on the Mishneh and was developed over the next 300 years. The former is mostly in Hebrew, the latter in Aramaic.

⁵¹ Ta’anit 15A, Steinsaltz, 3.

⁵² The prayer to be recited is the Amidah, to this day the central prayer of the liturgy. It is said while standing, which is what Amidah means; see also *Faking It* 68-72, for an extended discussion of pretending to say this prayer. It varies in length depending on additions made for special days. For the fasts decreed to bring rain special blessings are inserted. One mentions Abraham on Moriah and hence references the sacrifice of Isaac, for which see the discussion to follow.

sins.”⁵³ Like Rabbi Zera, he too recognizes the ark is being humiliated though he attributes the blame to us.

Yet, the whole ritual is structured to maintain a certain amount of deniability as to what is actually going on. It is not we who are calling God to account, but He who is calling us to repent, hence the reference to Nineveh and that city’s successful repentance. He is withholding rain because, yet again, we have offended him. But just maybe He needs a reminder that unlike some Near-Eastern vassal treaties in which the obligations run all one way, his covenant imposes reciprocal obligations, obligations He specifically assumed and delineated: “how You swore to them by Your Self.”

This is a humiliation ritual: the Ark, the Torah, exposed in public, covered with ashes. The Talmud makes clear that ashes must do the humiliating, not dirt, because ashes are more demeaning, and because the ashes symbolize “the ashes of Isaac.” In answer to why we put ashes on the ark and on our heads, one rabbi says, “So that He may remember the ashes of Isaac on our behalf.” The ashes are thus the symbolic remains of a human offering, the ultimate placatory sacrifice.

But Isaac was saved, was he not? He was not burned on the altar. The bible leaves no doubt on the matter. But many of the rabbis refused to buy the plain meaning of the text. They, it seems, were not quite willing to let the Lord off the hook so easily. A last-second staying of the hand and a substitution of a ram for a son was not sufficient compensation for so toying with Abraham and Isaac.⁵⁴ By this strange association of ideas, the rabbis reveal that they see a connection between the sacrifice of Isaac and the humiliation of the Ark and it is a connection in which shaming and humiliation provide the connecting tissue. When we debase the Torah with ashes and force it to grovel it is not just any ashes but the ashes of

⁵³ 16A, Steinsaltz, 15-16.

⁵⁴ The view that Isaac was slaughtered on Moriah, contrary to the literal biblical text, has a long history, detailed impeccably by Shalom Spiegel in *The Last Trial*. The ashes of Isaac were already understood to be nonmetaphorical in the first generation of commentators known as the Amoraim, c. 200 AD. Other traditions argue that the ram that was substituted for Isaac was a pet bellwether named Isaac; see Ginzberg, 252n245.

Isaac,⁵⁵ whose ashes are a shame unto the Lord. Am I blaspheming by suggesting that this ceremony pointedly means to shame God? That there is a strong hint that the Torah is being put through what Isaac was put through? If I am, there are more than a few analogous rituals to justify the claim.

Taking yourself hostage

The faithful of other dispensations punish their saints and gods when these do not deliver, do not answer prayers, do not send rains or protect their followers against their enemies. To put not too fine a point on it, they may even kill their god, crucify him, tear him to pieces, or shame and humiliate him. The religious and the legal meet here, and the assumptions normally attributed to the one also underpin the other. These rituals are legal, because we are talking about debt collection, the fulfillment and enforcement of obligations covenanted to. They are religious when the debtor is God or a saint, or when the gods must be understood to provide part of the sanctioning force when a lowly creditor tries to collect on his debt from a more powerful person.

Let us first take two legal rituals whose near identity in style and purpose was noted in the nineteenth century by the legal historian Sir Henry Maine. In India, the ritual is called “sitting dharna.” A desperate creditor places himself before his higher-status debtor in abject squalor and starves himself, sometimes to death. Should he die, the debtor would be considered his murderer. The British found the custom barbaric, about at the same level with suttee, and tried to ban it.⁵⁶ If one sees, rightly, in Gandhi’s form of resistance an avatar of sitting dharna, then the ritual survived quite robustly.

In the ancient laws of Ireland—the dating of which remains problematic, but for our purposes seventh-eighth century will serve—when a poor man sought to collect against

⁵⁵ Rabbi Steinsaltz (16) has a long note showing that the ashes as Isaac’s is the accepted interpretation.

⁵⁶ Maine, *Lectures*, 39-40. Sitting dharna is of ancient pedigree. Thus the *Law Code of Manu* 8.49, Olivelle, 126. The means employed by the low to assert claims against the mighty or to resist their claims are discussed by Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* and by M. P. Baumgartner, “Social Control from Below.”

his powerful debtor, lacking the power to capture [distrain/distress] the debtor's cattle and hold them until the debt was paid, he instead went to the door of his debtor and fasted. Indeed, the Old Irish term is properly translated as "fasting *at*," or "fasting *against*" his debtor. I quote from the legal compilation known as *Senchus Mor*:

Notice precedes distraint except if it be by persons of distinction, or upon persons of distinction; fasting precedes distress in their case. He who does not give a pledge to fasting is an evader of all; he who disregards all things shall not be paid by God or man (1.113).⁵⁷

Remain unmoved by the fasting creditor and there is a suggestion God will aid the poor man, though perhaps there is more force in the stricture that makes the "evader of all's" own loans to others now appear to be uncollectible.

As with sitting *dharna* in India, the Irish tradition of "fasting against" has been alleged to account for their style of politics. Thus the infamous hunger strikes in 1981 at Maze prison, when ten prisoners starved themselves to death in protest for being classified as "ordinary decent criminals," rather than as prisoners of war.⁵⁸

Add this Norse variant employing similar shaming techniques, in which debt collection narrowly conceived is not the issue but constraining a more powerful person to grant your demand is. A man named *Hrapp* is being chased by people intent on killing him, and who have a strong claim of right to do so. He had impregnated his host's daughter, killed his steward, mortally wounded his son, and robbed and burned down a temple. *Hrapp* throws himself face down before a man named *Thrain*, begging him to help him escape. Says *Hrapp* to the reluctant *Thrain*: "I'm not going to move from this spot. They shall kill me here before your eyes, and all men will speak of you with contempt."⁵⁹ *Thrain*, much against his interest, grants the request. Back in Ireland, St. Patrick found

⁵⁷ *Ancient Laws of Ireland: Senchus Mor*.

⁵⁸ So too Terence McSwiney, lord mayor of Cork, who starved himself in Brixton prison in 1920 after a 74-day hunger strike.

⁵⁹ *Njal's saga* ch. 88, I am following Magnusson/Pálsson's translation for *Njal's saga*; otherwise, *Hávamál* excepted, Old Norse translations are mine. See also *Grettir's saga* ch. 45; *Ljósvetninga saga* ch. 18; *Vatnsdæla saga* ch. 24.

himself, via an angelic intermediary, in a negotiation with God over some matter. The angel informs Patrick that God is not going to give Patrick everything he is asking for because the request is excessive: “Is that His pleasure then?” asks Patrick; “Yes,” says the angel. “Then this is my pleasure,” says Patrick. “I will not go from here until I am dead or until the requests are granted.” God, like Thrain, relents.⁶⁰

These rituals all operate by inflicting or threatening self-harm as way of forcing another to feel compelled to save you from yourself. Think of children throwing tantrums, holding their breath, refusing to eat their food (fasting against you, in other words) or, in more extreme cases, smashing their heads against the floor. In a more restrained version at a later age, even now in your looming dotage, think of the fantasies you entertain of dying or suiciding, just to imagine how sorry your spouse, friends, or children will feel for not treating you right. Old Shloyme, 86 years old, in Isaac Babel’s story, hangs himself before the door of his son’s house for all the town to see, to protest his son abandoning the home, his faith, and him: “Shloyme would tell God of all the wrong that was done to him here... Shloyme began to sway before the door of the house in which he had left a warm stove and the grease-stained Torah of his fathers.” Sitting dharna in the shtetl.⁶¹

In short, one is taking oneself hostage. If such threats to yourself are not quite sufficient to prompt the desired action, you can also hold something you know is sacred to the person you are fasting against: his son, his Torah, his mother, a saint, his relics.⁶²

The issue of hostage-taking, strangely, arises in the same section of the Talmud in which the humiliation of the ark takes place. The rabbis move to discuss the manner in which Nineveh repented. “What did the [Ninevites] do? They tied the animals separately and the young animals separately. They said before Him: ‘Master of the Universe, if You do not have mercy on us, we will not have mercy on these.’” This is pure

⁶⁰ Cited in Little, *Benedictine Maledictions* 161. I am much indebted to Little’s book; see also Patrick Geary, “Humiliation of Saints.”

⁶¹ Babel, *Collected Stories* 3-7.

⁶² The creditor may have his son or servant do the sitting, or he may confine his own son and threaten to kill him; Jolly, 318-19.

brinksmanship. Show us mercy God or we let the young calves and lambs which we have separated from their mothers die for want of milk.⁶³ This story of the Ninevites is not to be found in Jonah, and is wholly invented. But it fits in with the rabbis' earlier discussion about the ashes of Isaac. In both cases innocent kids are threatened with death, as we are too by the tardy rains.

Humiliation rituals abound in the Hebrew Bible; Mordecai sits dharna before the king's gate in the book of Esther (4.1-2).⁶⁴ We have plenty of sackcloth and ashes, ropes around necks, sittings in the mire, shavings of heads, rendings of garments, but what about accosting your upper-status debtor? Is there an analogy to the Irish and Hindu rituals, purely in the context of debt collection?

There seems to be. Deuteronomy 24 deals with various aspects of creditor-debtor relations, primarily with pledges. Verse 15 requires paying a laborer his wages promptly on the day earned: "you shall give him his hire on the day he earns it, before the sun goes down (for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it); *lest he cry against you to the Lord*, and it be sin in you" (RSV). Suppose the worker's crying against you to the Lord is not a metaphor, but in fact a formal cursing. If the wages are not paid, the laborer cries unto Yahweh and shames his employer. The rather clear indication of the Hebrew, in light of the general methods that the lowly have of extracting debts from their superiors we have been discussing, reveals that Deuteronomy too has its dharna-like procedure to recover a debt owed.⁶⁵

⁶³ 16A, Steinsaltz, 19-20.

⁶⁴ Apparently there is a rule about sitting dharna against the Persian king: "for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth." Esther hastens to send Mordecai proper raiment.

⁶⁵ See also Job 7.1-2, 11, which uses the image of a hireling trying to collect his wages unjustly withheld, as he sits dharna-like in squalor crying out unto (and against) the Lord:

Has not man a hard service upon earth,
and are not his days like the days of a hireling?
Like a slave who longs for the shadow,
and like a hireling who looks for his wages...
Therefore I will not restrain my mouth;
I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. (RSV)

Making others squirm

Sitting dharna, fasting against, lying down threatening to die before the eyes of a reluctant protector, are all shaming rituals. The complainant humiliates himself in order to shame the person he is pleading to. The ritual is also meant to be embarrassing and painful to those witnessing it. While its ostensible purpose is to shame its target, the target may well be impervious to feeling much shame on account of such a lowly soul. The ritual is thus meant to be hard for the audience witnessing it to endure, and it will be performed publicly so that it is sure to be witnessed. The pressure the ritual brings to bear is that it makes everyone uncomfortable. Should the debtor himself not feel the pain of his groveling creditor, he may find it harder to ignore the discomfort of the audience witnessing the spectacle the beseecher is making of himself.⁶⁶

An example from nineteenth-century Balkan feuding practice demonstrates nicely the contagion of embarrassment generated by a humiliation ritual. I quote from an account given by an informant to the intrepid Edith Durham in the first decades of the last century:

And the [peacemakers] decreed ... that I should hang the gun which fired the fatal shot around my neck and go on all fours for forty or fifty paces to the brother of the deceased Nikola. I hung the gun to my neck and began to crawl toward him, crying: "Take it O Kum,⁶⁷ in the name of God and St. John." I had not gone ten paces when all the people jumped up and took off their caps and cried out as I did. And by God, though I had killed his brother, my humiliation horrified him, and his face flamed when so many people held their caps in their hands. He ran up and took the gun from my neck. He took me by [the hair] and raised me to

⁶⁶ Reality TV seems to suggest our capacities for Schadenfreude in another's loss of dignity are near inexhaustible, at least when the humiliation is not taking place in our physical presence.

⁶⁷ "Kum" is an epithet meaning something like brother, friend, which presumes the state of relations that has yet to be agreed to by the victim's brother. It adds a dollop more coerciveness to the ritual.

my feet, and as he kissed me the tears ran down his face... And when we had kissed I too wept.⁶⁸

Ten paces are all the audience can bear. They force the successful conclusion of the ritual. One might detect a small hint in the narrator's "I had not gone ten paces..." that he knows he got off easy; indeed he got away with murder. But what can the brother of the dead man do? He too feels the unendurable awkwardness of the situation, and he is the only one with the power to spare everyone more of it.

Repair to the monasteries of northern France in the tenth and eleventh centuries for a ritual known as the humiliation of saints, definitively studied by Lester Little, from whom I borrow these examples. Suppose the saint whose relics a monastery houses—the monastery is his house—has of late not been answering the monks' prayers meant to stop a local lord from interfering with property the monks claim belongs to them. After argument and prayer has gained them nothing, the monks ritually and literally humiliate their saint in a solemn ceremony. They take their saint, his bones, his body, out of his reliquary on the altar and put him in the dirt or on the ground, the *humus*, whence the word humiliate. This is on all points identical to the ceremony in the Talmud. The monks will prostrate themselves along with the saint who, like them, is understood to be himself prostrated in the dirt, joining with the monks in the ceremony in which he is made to participate, though in fact the ceremony is in significant part performed *against* him. But they make sure the word gets out to the offending lord in order to worry him that it will be against him that the saint will avenge his humiliation.

Sometimes the crucifixes would be laid down on the floor, the doors of the church barred with thorns, and services would be discontinued. God and the saint were not going to get their due until they made sure the monks get theirs; no sacraments, nothing, until the saint or God wakes from his sleep and attends to duty. Recall Psalm 6: "in Sheol who can give Thee praise?" The saint is getting a not so gentle reminder.

⁶⁸ From Durham, *Laws and Customs of the Balkans* 89-90, quoted in Boehm, *Blood Revenge* 134. Compare a similar ceremony among the mountain Jews of Dagestan in which the family of the killer had to kiss the dust from the feet of their victim's kin at the scene of reconciliation; see Blady, ch. 6.

No different from the rabbis, so too the monks vaguely misrecognized that they were punishing their saints, that they and no one else had placed him in the dirt. The rabbis claim that the ark was really joining them, helping them out: “And why do we place burnt ashes on the ark? Rabbi Yehudah ben Pazi said, ‘as if to say, “I will be with him in trouble.”’ Rech Lakish said, ‘in all their affliction He was afflicted.’”⁶⁹ The modern explicator, Rabbi Steinsaltz, explains that placing ashes on the ark “is a way of saying that God is with His people in their time of affliction; for just as the people cover themselves with ashes so too does God.”

Rabbi Steinsaltz, like the rabbis in the Talmud, stands the ritual on its head and attributes to God his own act of humiliation, absolving the congregants, you and me, of fasting *against* him, by having him fast *with* us, though it is not as if the Ark covered itself in ashes. The rabbis are blind (or feign blindness) to the muscling they did to get God to join them. The monks said much the same during their humiliation rituals. Some humiliators of saints, less sophisticated, did not repress the truth. Peasants would take whips to the saint’s relics to wake him or her up. “‘Why are you sleeping? Why do you allow us to perish,’ they shout. ‘If you are a true martyr of God, help us now in this moment of great need.’”⁷⁰ By the fourteenth century the Church came down hard against this ritual declaring it a “detestable abuse” done by persons of “unspeakable impiety” who would place sacred objects on the floor amid brambles and thorns.⁷¹

The person being groveled to knew these rituals of self-abasement were often meant to do more than merely register obedient submission. He might even try to steal the ritual, shifting his role from supplicatee to supplicator. In Ireland and in India, it was possible for the person fasted at to join in the fast, in a competitive fast off.⁷² In various rituals of submission and pardon seeking, we sometimes can find the person beseeched rushing to get a flop of his own in before the

⁶⁹ 16A 2-4, Steinsaltz, 16.

⁷⁰ Little, 135, citing the *Miracula S. Aigulfi* ch. 4.

⁷¹ 237.

⁷² Jolly, 319.

would-be flopper can flop, to beat him to the shaming ritual and turn it against the person intending to perform it. Gregory of Tours, in his *History of the Franks* (sixth century), describes the trial of bishop Praetextatus before a convocation of bishops and King Chilperic. Praetextatus suddenly throws himself on the ground and confesses to plotting against the king; the king not to be outdone, himself flops before the bishops. “The king knelt at the feet of the bishops and exclaimed: ‘Most pious bishops, you hear the guilty man confess his execrable crime.’ We wept as we raised the King from the ground....”⁷³

Or we see the powerful take over the ritual entirely as when they “humbly beg” a favor or a donation from their inferiors. “Humbly begging” can be seen as a way of graciously setting the inferior at ease when the superior could simply extort what he wanted without engaging in a humiliation ritual to get it.⁷⁴ Or, more ominously, ritually denying one’s obvious superiority works as a threat. Beware lords who play the beggar, for their requests are a form of taxation.⁷⁵

Inept performers vs. professionals

Any ritual can be commandeered by skillful players, and turned against those who were supposed to benefit from its performance. Or a ritual can be made a mockery of by overplaying it, or underplaying it. A ritual of humiliation can also be performed with all sincerity, and yet be performed ineptly, because the person does not know when enough is enough, when it is time to pick the Torah up from the dirt,

⁷³ Gregory of Tours, 5.18; see also the flop of William the Conqueror before Ealdred, archbishop of York; van Caenegem, No. 1, I.1, also No. 139, I.111. Moses does the same at the outset of the Korah rebellion; Num. 16.4.

⁷⁴ This point is made by Rosenwein, 135.

⁷⁵ Unless the lord was *compelled* to play the beggar. See Whitman’s discussion of legislation passed in 1790 to change the rule regarding payment of the *cens*, a nominal tax in *ancien regime* France, which was to have been brought to the lord as a sign of respect and subordination by his free tenants. The new legislation forced the lord to have to go collect the *cens* no differently than were he an ordinary creditor; he had to seek out his debtor. The lord, after a fashion, was forced to sit dharna upon his now not-so-lowly debtor.

restore the saint to his reliquary, or stop clamoring and get off the dung heap and wash up. You had to make sure you performed these kinds of rituals in a way that sold well. You had thus to perform it at the right time, the right place, with the right amount of passion, and for a bearable length of time, not too short, not too long. Botch the self-abnegation and you become a laughingstock, a byword. Appian relates this of Cicero:

Clodius impeached Cicero for breach of the constitution because he had put Lentulus and Cethegus and their followers to death without trial. Although Cicero had displayed a most noble spirit of resolution in the affair itself, when it came to being prosecuted he collapsed; he put on miserable clothing and threw himself down covered in filth and squalor in front of those he met in the streets without even being ashamed of bothering people who knew nothing of the matter, so that thanks to his inappropriate behavior he became of figure of fun instead of an object of pity...When Clodius even insulted him by interrupting his pleas in the street, Cicero abandoned all hope and...embraced exile voluntarily.⁷⁶

If one could botch humiliation rituals and rituals of self-abnegation by overdoing them, one could also get a reputation for being really good at them; one could become a professional performer of them, and compete for honors in the self-abnegation sweepstakes. Maine reports that certain Brahmins offered themselves for hire by creditors to sit dharna for them. It would take a brazen debtor to risk the supernatural sanctions, in addition to the this-worldly ones, that would follow upon letting a Brahmin starve to death on his doorstep.⁷⁷ One would think that the ritual would lose some of

⁷⁶ Appian, 2.15. The Latin idiom for to put on mourning garb, rendered in the passage as “miserable clothing,” indeed Cicero’s own phrase for his behavior, is *vestem mutare*, simply to change clothes. This is clearly a euphemism. Euphemism often suggests the presence of taboo or the sacred; see Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 3.15.5.

⁷⁷ See Maine, *Lectures* 40: “...what would follow if the creditor simply allowed the debtor to starve? Undoubtedly the Hindoo supposes that some supernatural penalty would follow; indeed, he generally gives definiteness to it by retaining a Brahmin to starve himself vicariously, and no Hindoo doubts what would come of causing a Brahmin's death.” Along with professional self-

its moral force if it were performed by a hired gun, Brahmin or not. We should not, however, underestimate the power even “mere” ritual can bring to bear when its goal is to shame or curse. The high-status debtor no more wants a professional dharna sitter showing up than he wants his low-status creditor on his doorstep.

A somewhat different problem is raised by the Irish saints, the early pole-sitting ascetics, and the pus-drinking saints of the later middle ages.⁷⁸ They were often openly engaged in asceticism contests. They fought to win and were proud of their ability to out-self-abnegate their competitors. Unlike St. Anskar they were not about to give up the competition because of scruples about the sinfulness of pride. Would such glorying in one’s skills at fasting against undo its magical powers?

The Talmud tells of a certain Honi HaMe’aggel (Honi the Circle Drawer) who was asked to pray for rain to relieve the community from drought. In an incident that could have been lifted from an Irish saint’s life or from Hindu debt collection rituals, he drew a circle around himself and announced to God that he would not step outside the circle until it rained. First God sends a mere couple of drops. Honi is not satisfied and stays in the circle complaining that this was not what he had asked for; then God sends a damaging torrent and Honi says this was not what he asked for either. The third time God caves and sends a proper gentle rain, because Honi, like St. Patrick, was not going to leave the circle until he got what he wanted. The threat not to leave the circle is a threat to die, to fast to death. Jonah did much the same in anger outside Nineveh. For hapless Jonah, though, the ritual did not work.

Honi’s behavior drew a remonstrance from the President of the Sanhedrin who said: “If you were not Honi, I would decree a ban upon you [for addressing God disrespectfully]. But what shall I do to you, for you act like a spoiled child before God and He does your will for you, like a son who acts like a spoiled child with his father, and he does his will for

abnegators consider those extreme cults of self-abnegation, the Cynics, and certain Shiva worshipers, among other “renouncers” in India. See Ingalls.

⁷⁸ See my *Anatomy of Disgust* 157-61.

him.”⁷⁹ The President of the Sanhedrin recognizes Honi’s circle drawing ritual to be on all points comparable to a child’s temper tantrum, a holding oneself hostage, just as we saw earlier.⁸⁰

The next time your child throws a tantrum, the next time you indulge the thought of how sorry you hope people feel when you are dead, remember that falling to the floor, bowing and scraping, getting lower than the other guy, is often exactly the best way to upend him, or get him to fulfill his obligations to you. The risk, of course, is that you might die in the process. Sometimes that might be precisely your intent. The Buddhist monks who brought down the Diem regime in South Vietnam by setting themselves on fire, to say nothing of Jesus adding to the humiliation of his incarnation that of his crucifixion, are cases in point.

That these rituals of fasting against give some depth to our discussion of complaint is clear; what perhaps is not quite clear is how it fits in with my complaining about old age. *Homo querelus*, man the complainer, is as we already noted, what we are. We demand complaint as the first sign of life. No cry from the baby is not good news; we even rank newborns by how vociferously they complain in those very first moments outside the comfort of the womb. Two of the criteria in the Apgar score depend on the quickness and volume of complaint. Complaining is one’s essence in adolescence, where at least it is often laced with edgy humor, those teen years producing some of the cleverer, as well as the stupidest observations of our lives. It continues as the basis of a

⁷⁹ 19A, Steinsaltz, 66-67. The charmed circle finds its way into Irish and Hindu debt collection practices very much of the sitting-dharna type: I will not leave this circle until you pay what you owe. Jolly, 319, mentions an ancient Indian custom of drawing a circle, this time around the debtor, which if the debt is not paid the debtor cannot step outside. Honi was hardly a humble man and his lack of humility has been rewarded by an enormous bibliography devoted to his drawing this circle and his successful bearding of God; see most recently the discussion in Stone, “Rabbinic Legal Magic.”

⁸⁰ The Gemara indicates Honi has some biblical warrant for waiting out God in this fashion; see Habakkuk 2.1: “I will stand on my watch, Take up my station at the post, And wait to see what He will say to me, What He will reply to my complaint.” 23A, Steinsaltz, 116. See Stone, 107, discussing a midrash on the Hab. passage.

considerable measure of our conversation, both the most interesting and the most dreary: interesting when it functions in the small-minded comedic mode manifesting “the instinctive spite of local gossip”⁸¹ as we pierce and expose the pretenses and vanities of others, and dreary when it is humorlessly self-referential. Old age hardly has a lock on complaining about one’s lot, but the ancient view of old age is that it is the time owned by the drearier types of complaint, and this book is not about to disconfirm that ancient wisdom.

⁸¹ Ursula Dronke’s apt coinage, 11.

