

# Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole

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*A state of shock is what happens to us—individually or as a society—when we experience a sudden and unprecedented event for which we do not yet have an adequate explanation. At its essence, a shock is the gap that opens up between event and existing narratives to explain the event. Being creatures of narrative, humans tend to be very uncomfortable with meaning vacuums—which is why those opportunistic players I have termed “disaster capitalists” have been able to rush into the gap with their preexisting wish lists and simplistic stories of good and evil. The stories themselves may be cartoonishly wrong . . . But at least those stories exist—and that alone is enough to make them better than the nothingness of the gap.*

Naomi Klein (8-9)

## 1.

Much of what follows here will be an exploration of the human inclination to endorse inane conspiracy theories or join insane cults in favor of actual thinking, an inclination that is running more amok these days than at any other time in my life, the ongoing mass-surrender of personal agency to a rogues’ gallery of seamy grifters and scary charlatans, Gog and Magog masquerading as Goofy and Mr. Magoo, appearing at first far too absurd to take seriously but extremely dangerous for precisely that reason, given the series of “shocks” recent history has inflicted on the American experiment, the level of trauma they have induced, and the desperation with which so many now crave coherent “stories,” no matter how deranged, that promise not only to make sense of it right now but to end the confusion once and for all.

For a variety of reasons, I’ve been wondering lately how “intelligent life,” which is how we advertise ourselves to the



universe, can be such gullible prey for the “disaster capitalists” Klein talks about. The reason she proposes is that human beings are “very uncomfortable with meaning vacuums.” But what does that mean? The kind of discomfort she is talking about is not physical of course but psychic. I’ll take the liberty of translating it into “anxiety,” which, when it is intense enough (I know from experience) turns into a very specific kind of fear, one that can become vaguely generalized, especially when there is a “meaning vacuum” instead of a real threat. The effect is to feel under threat all the time, unsure from what, remaining always on high alert, brain awash with adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol, that chemical soup designed to operate in short bursts not as long-term addictions.

After a while the only way to relieve the discomfort is not “fight or flight,” which are appropriate responses to an immediate threat, but to “run and hide,” away from the nagging dread that chronic fear imposes. That’s where the “rabbit hole” in my title comes in, a commonly used metaphor for the cults and conspiracy theories that are one of my targets here. To make my connection, I want to highlight the figure of the rabbit in this image. We all have seen video of rabbits running away from predators. Under those conditions, pretty much any hole will do for cover. If they find one that feels safe, they stay there until the coast is clear, then come back out and operate as usual, case closed. Now imagine that rabbit feeling under such threat all the time even with no predator chasing it. In desperation to relieve its instinctual fear, it will seek out the deepest hole it can find and dig deeper and deeper into it until it finally feels secure. Doesn’t matter if it’s a pleasant place to be or if there is a good way out. It stays. Disaster capitalists—i.e., many politicians, pundits and priests, among other authority figures—know this instinctively. So they generate as much fear as possible then proffer their pre-made holes and invite the rabbits in, where they are more than happy to sacrifice personal agency

to whoever dug the “safe-hole” for them.

There is I know an antidote both to this generalized fear and to rabbit-hole-relief for it. But how to name it? I just couldn’t come up with one that satisfied me. Last night I finished a complete first draft of this essay. Its working title was “Off the Rails,” which I knew was not quite right. This morning I woke up with the term “quantum reading” flashing in my head. Based on long and considered experience, I trust my dreams implicitly to help me solve my most intractable problems. That term struck me at once as both perfectly on point and pretty preposterous, and I couldn’t decide which to go with: pitch it or ditch it.

One of the primary features of quantum phenomena, in the material world at least, is a simultaneity of seemingly contrary, even contradictory, conditions or states. The particle-wave duality that photons and electrons express is the Ur-example of this: What in a “natural” state is always-both becomes, at the moment of measurement, one or the other, depending on what question the experiment is asking. I could see that I had already laid out a number of such anomalous concepts along the way: systems-level thinking, stacked reading, mystery, negative capability, creative irresolution, and non-contradiction, among others. What I needed was an overarching metaphor to unify them. Quantum reading seemed just the ticket for that. So there it is now, leading my charge in a title that sounds more like an MMA cage match than an academic article. I know enough about quantum mechanics to know that quantum reading is a stretch. By the same token, the term quantum has entered the popular lexicon in ways that broaden its application considerably. I’m taking advantage of that definitional flexibility to deploy the term in this new way.

I want to open with a unique and illuminating reading experience I had last month, hoping it will serve as a proper portal into those larger questions about personal agency, how to maintain and sustain it, that I have on my mind right now.



All of a sudden, in late October, I went from having no books on my docket to five, each of which looked really interesting to me. They were: two books by Chellis Glendinning: *Off the Map: An Expedition Deep into Imperialism, the Global Economy, and Other Earthly Whereabouts* (1999), a semi-autobiographical narrative/manifesto concerning the deleterious effects on Indigenous people of unscrupulous land-rights practices in New Mexico, and *My Name is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization* (1994), a book she says she wrote "as a mental-health professional who has researched personal issues of healing and recovery, as well as global issues concerning the psychological impacts of environmental disaster" (xi), both recommended by a friend; Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979), one of the first deeply scholarly treatments of the lost gospels that were unearthed in Egypt in the 1940s, suggested by another friend; *The Selected Writings of Mikhail Bakunin* (2010), a 19<sup>th</sup> century lapsed-Marxist-turned-anarchist, whose name I just happened upon provocatively in a review of Pagels' book; and *The Banished Immortal: A Life of Li Bai* (2019), Ha Jin's biography of the eighth century Chinese poet Li Bai (Li Po in Western culture), a favorite poet of mine, sent to me by a friend.

I figured I'd read a bit of each to decide which to focus on first, then stage the others going forward. They were all so captivating to me, though, each in its own way, I just couldn't pick one. So I ended up reading them all simultaneously, 10 or 15 pages of one, maybe a chapter of the next and so forth, night after night for several weeks. I have often, previously, read a series of disparate books in sequence, divining a commonality among them, one that would not be evident if the books were approached discretely; this is the first time, though, I've intentionally "stacked" that process into a singular event.

Very shortly a wonderful thing began to happen: I'd be in the midst of one and would think I was still somehow in

the midst of one of the others. Or, occasionally, all of the others! It was as if I was not reading five separate books about widely divergent subjects set in vastly different contexts, but one book with five different facets. I began to wonder how that could possibly be. There were no obvious resemblances in authorial style (even the two Glendinning books were quite different), and the books' themes, historical moments and ideological imperatives had nothing specifically in common. If I drew a Venn diagram with those various circles there would be very little, if any, grayed-out overlap at the center. So what was it, I wondered, that led me to this peculiar sense of simultaneity?

After I read in this way or a while—i.e., from what I now call a “systems-level” (a concept commonly used these days in relation to biological, social and institutional complexes, which is, most generally, the capacity to examine layered part-whole relationships holistically, from an organic rather than a mechanical point of view)—I could see that what these books shared at their respective cores was a very basic premise: the belief that current and seemingly intractable cultural dysfunctions could be traced back to a specific tipping point in the past when things started to go badly wrong, though each located their preferred tipping point at a different moment in time, anywhere from centuries to many millennia ago, sometimes precipitated intentionally, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes via broad cultural shifts, sometimes via individual initiatives. They were not then, taken together, simply a congeries of alternative blame-narratives for the current state of affairs but felt representative at this deeper level of a stereotypical habit of mind that seems perpetually to afflict generational thinking: Things would be way better now if this or that had not happened somewhere along the way, as in “before my time,” to set them awry, and I need to try to figure out when and why.

Counterintuitively, the practical effect of this was to force me to focus on the present moment as both intensely real—



immediate, local, exactly what it is, no matter how it got this way; and fully negotiable, so how if at all can it realistically be altered going forward?—rather than to lament that it is not what it should be, the only real solution going back in time for a mulligan, which is not yet, I’m sure for the best, a technically feasible option! If there were this many different ways of explaining how things went off the rails stacked at my bedside, there were likely many, many more. And picking one felt more like blowing smoke into a smoke-filled room than finding the smoking gun.

At impasses of this sort—when we believe that things are wrong and there seems no obvious way to set them right again—we have a choice: throw up our hands in despair or plot out some path forward that, while not ideal, is at least potentially productive. Whichever of these we pick, though, there is an even more consequential decision to make: whether to turn over our allegiance and our energies to an outside agent to provide an already packaged narrative purporting to make sense of the problem/solution paradigm, often these days some conspiracy theory or cult, among the latter of which I will include (unfairly you might say, though I don’t), most “organized” religions, especially of the fundamentalist ilk; science, when it is overly valorized or demonized via the popular media; and all party-line political ideologies, from mainstream to delulu; or to assert personal agency via what I called “actual thinking” above, which begins in chaos and moves grudgingly toward narrative, if it ever arrives there at all. The former require almost no work, research, fact-checking, new-knowledge-formation, time, or these days, with audio-visual social media the information source of choice, even reading: just opening the spigot and glug-glug-glugging whatever it proffers. Thus its appeal. The latter requires all six of those and then some.

So where does each of these books locate the pivot point toward our current dysfunctions? Glendinning identifies the problem materially, specifically how the meaning of “land”

changed as it moved from an unbounded reservoir of vital resources for the sustenance of early human communities, to the individually owned “properties” typical in Western societies. She adheres to the now commonly held theory that this transition began to occur millennia ago, as humans turned away from hunting and gathering as their mode of survival (which requires constant changes of venue, therefore no excessive attachment to specific bits of land), to farming (which requires sustained settlement in a fixed place and significant investments of energy and resources that then necessitate such attachment.) In the latter case, the argument goes, one needs to mark off one’s field and protect it from others. In other words, “own” it. This land-protection strategy gradually evolved into the plot-based system of land management typical in the European societies, which traveled with them as they colonized the rest of the “off the map” world, enforcing their conventions for owning land as modes of cultural privilege, a process that can involve anything from buying it with trinkets to displacing with violence whoever happens to be on the land at the moment.

*Off the Map* reports specifically on the insidious effects of such land-rights practices in New Mexico, Glendinning’s home at the time, via the many kinds of duplicity, chicanery, fraud, and when necessary forced displacement, that has effected the gradual translation of Indigenous/Native land over to White “settlers.” *My Name is Chellis* offers a more theorized view of these matters, some of which derives from her professional experience as a psychologist, some from her background in feminist cultural studies. Both books are grounded in her personal experiences as a child who was sexually abused in a grievous way by her own father, which in some ways becomes a metaphor for the many other kinds of rape that patriarchal Empires inflict on “land” and those who inhabit it.

Bakunin locates the problem immaterially, in the ways we think about and relate to God, most particularly the



God of Abraham, the transcendent creator who stands at the headwaters of all three of the major Western religions: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. For Bakunin, given his Marxist roots, this God is an entirely human invention that inevitably displaces authority out of human hands and into a transcendent nether-sphere, a move that not only disables collective earthly enterprise for practical betterment, but also insidiously provides the template for authoritarian political systems, especially class- or caste-based hierarchies that create mega-power and -wealth at the top of the pyramid at the expense of the “working classes” at the base. The logic for this analysis is pristinely Marxist—think his “opiate of the masses” trope for example—familiar, lucid, and persuasive; and his case is surprisingly well-documented. He understands European dialectical philosophy quite deeply, of course. But he is also well-versed in Biblical literature and history.

What interested me most though was Bakunin’s eventual turn away from Marxism, arguing that as Karl Marx became more and more domineering in his approach to what the “dictatorship of the proletariat” would look like in the shorter term—which by most accounts he did, egomaniacally, over the course of his life—Marxism itself began to replicate at a structural level the very God-problem it purported to override. Bakunin doesn’t say this specifically, but he implies that any calling card that has “dictatorship” in its mission statement will ultimately be used to justify not a transitional but a permanent authoritarian system that simply remolds the God-topped power-pyramid into a different template: a worldly State overseen by a few human “gods”—dictators *cum* oligarchs, a privileged aristocracy of overlords flourishing extravagantly at the expense of “the masses” —instead of by one transcendent God. Bakunin is writing this well before the Russian revolution and the creation of actual communist states in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which turned out in most cases to become exactly what Bakunin predicted they would. The mode of anarchism Bakunin endorses is surprisingly cogent



and orderly, a “systems-level” approach to non-authoritarian social reforms, quite unlike the forms of anarchism we are familiar with these days, whether from the left (Antifa, e.g.) or the right (Proud Boys, e.g.), many of which are violent more for the sake of generating chaos than reform.

Pagels also locates the problem in the God-matrix, specifically during the Romanization of the Catholic Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the Church bureaucracy decided how exactly to organize the relationship of authority between the individual practitioner and the clergy, finally ultra-valorizing the latter over the former. This required resolving two impediments to unanimity: establishing the exact nature of the divinity of Jesus, which turned out to be quite a prickly logical problem; and codifying a universally orthodox Bible, which involved excising with prejudice, via the heresy route, all alternative views competing with the newly minted orthodoxy, their books banned, buried or burned in the process. In other words, to create a religious system mirroring the power-based Roman imperial system with which the Catholic Church was now allied: “universal,” patriarchal, hierarchical, vainglorious.

Among the many casualties in this process were the gnostic gospels, which generally favored individual enterprise over externally imposed authority in spiritual matters. We now call these the “lost” gospels, most of which remained so until they were unearthed by accident in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. It might be more accurate to call them (though she doesn’t) the “disappeared” gospels, given the extreme forms of censorship that excised them not just from the canon, but from material existence. Had not the Nag Hammadi trove been buried, most likely in the fourth century, the vast majority of this material would not be available to us in any form at all. Given that we are living through a similar kind of censorship era, ranging from “cancel-culture” to, more recently, rabid book-bannings, there is an air of currency about this now long-forgotten example of the purgation



of alternative ideologies in favor of an externally imposed orthodoxy.

The outlier book in this group was, obviously, the biography of Li Bai who is Chinese (all the other books focus on Western culture) and was about an individual life (not a tradition of ideas, a movement, or a paradigm shift.) What made this an interesting counterpoint in this five-piece puzzle was how, in my mind at least, Bai [Chinese naming conventions place the surname before the given name; I borrow here Jin's preference, both with Bai's name and his, for treating the given name as surname-equivalent] embodied the larger scale problem in his singular life, which was riven by the competing aspirations that his own culture at the time made irreconcilable by definition.

His public ambition, a deep and fierce one, was to make a "name" for himself in the upper echelons of the military and political hierarchy in China at the time, an almost inescapable masculine trope in all patriarchal cultures, East or West. Early on, Bai used his astonishing abilities as a writer and his very large personality as devices to pursue such a rise in status. These skills did usher him into circles of wealth, privilege and power, but, as his biographer makes clear, he ended up always being perceived more as an entertainer or mouthpiece, a tool for aristocrats to use to further their personal ambitions, most often at the expense of his. In short, despite a lifetime of earnest pursuit of his goal, he never achieved any permanent position or commission. There was always inevitably a falling out that left him once again adrift, on the road to somewhere else, living off friends. The problem in most instances was a combination of: his creative genius, which made him intolerant of the shallow and calculative stupidity that regulated public life, and which those in power found just as threatening as they did alluring, the former winning out sooner or later over the latter; his expansive ego, which he was chronically unable to temper in the company of lesser mortals, often offending them; and his uncanny ability to

pick the wrong side of whatever conflict or intrigue he found himself enmeshed in.

Bai's private ambition, on the other hand, was to become a legendary poet living a reclusive life in the service of his work, another common trope for creative "geniuses" in cultures, like his and ours, that work hard both to celebrate their work and to keep them safely neutered on the sidelines, the old "pretty cool but too hot to handle" conundrum. Those two halves just don't work together, obviously. So his life was a series of chronic failures in personal terms, while he was alive, and the achievement of extraordinary fame in historical terms, mostly after his passing.

As Jin explains:

For decades Bai had been torn between two worlds—the top political circle and the religious order—but had been unable to exist in either one. In his own words, "Trying to be prosperous and divine,/ I have simply wasted my life pursuing both." (285)

So Bai traversed two paths simultaneously and was incapable of choosing, though it is telling that Bai characterizes only one of them as "divine." He fits into the cohort I'm writing about as a good example of what happens to someone with great creative gifts when they are unwilling or unable to be absorbed into, or submit to, the dominant ideology of the moment. Established and taken-for-granted cultural systems simply do not reward the most incisive forms of internal critique—and Bai was temperamentally inclined both to deep insight and naïve honesty—at least not with the kind of advancement Bai craved. In other words, he is akin to the "lost" gnostic gospelists Pagels documents, the marginalized anarchists Bakunin speaks to and for, and the Indigenous locals being fleeced of their land rights over and over by White settlers in Glendinning's New Mexico: all always shoved to the fringes, cast adrift, on the outs.

Everything they say may stake a claim to "truth," but that is never enough to win the day in a cultural economy where "power" is the dominant, often the only, currency. "Speaking



truth to power” simply cannot work, then or now, when one’s interlocutor(s) do not believe in even a flimsy, diaphanous “truth” that transcends or subtends their self-interested discourse. Truth stands relatively firm in its relationship with language and thinking, flummery floats around wherever its momentary purposes are best served, like those untethered statues Socrates assails in his vituperative argument with Meno. No historical moment in my lifetime demonstrates that dissociative tendency—discourse intentionally detached from evidence, fact, reason, or logic: all truth-related mechanisms—better than the one we’re enduring right now.

## 2.

For my upcoming weekly family Zoom with my brother, my sister, and a family friend, one of our “assigned” topics has to do with “conspiracy theories,” specifically if there are any we find personally attractive enough to at least semi-endorse. I thought of a couple that are minimally interesting to me: the Kennedy assassination, an enigma that seems perpetually intriguing to my generation, traumatized by that grievous moment; and alien life: I actually enjoy watching the cheesy “Ancient Aliens” series on TV from time to time and believe there is intelligent life throughout the universe, though I’m not persuaded it has either sought out, made, or wants any contact with ours, which it may not feel qualifies as “intelligent.” I feel no personal urgency to endorse any specific solution-theories to these enigmas. They are simply entertaining for me to think about. So my initial thought process for my report was brief and shallow, two things, done.

What did, though, engage my thinking was the larger question of why humans seem to be attracted to “conspiracy theories” in the first place. The vast majority of them appear (to non-adherents at least) patently inane, arranged via a logic that may be internally consistent but is completely disconnected from external fact- or evidence-based “reality.” Yet they still have a deep appeal to the human imagination.

And these days, they are especially pervasive and insidious organizational motifs in the political, religious, and social arenas of our public life, an index to the level of trauma recent events have induced. The very fact that most of us have ensconced in our personal lexicons tropes like Q-anon, Pizzagate, and vaccine-injected RFID microchips (the first three I thought of in about 5 seconds) demonstrates the attractive power of the strange “rabbit-hole-type” belief systems that subtend them. So that’s what I thought about.

When I began to ask myself why this was so, the first thing that crossed my mind was one of my go-to critiques of the modern imagination, especially its hyper-expression in the US these days: the inability to tolerate liminal states of mind, those situations, ideas or experiences that are ambiguous, ambivalent, anomalous, especially when they have two quite distinct, seemingly contradictory, but mutually essential aspects, which is, according to quantum mechanics, exactly what the physical universe we live in is like at the subatomic level. And in my view at least, exactly what human intelligence is still good for discerning and attending to, now that computers, robots, and AI can, theoretically, do all the more basic things humans used to do to make sense and money.

The everyday term I personally prefer to name such states of mind is “mystery,” one that was instilled in my inner world when I was quite young, middle-school age I’d say, ironically by Sister Paschal, the nun teaching my after-school Catholic catechism class, hardly a venue where you’d expect liminality would find a good home! She was introducing the concept of the trinity, the three-persons-in-one nature of the Christian God. But instead of giving us a long-winded theological disquisition, which is what I was expecting, and there are many of those I now know, hair-splittingly arcane, she said it was simply a mystery that you should (as a “good” Catholic) accept on faith without expecting to figure it out by conventional analytic means. Or not accept it, of course,



though she didn't proffer that option. In either case there was no point seeking its "solution." It was unfathomable. Instead of being disappointed by this "punt" I was delighted by it. I was already by my nature inclined to see all manner of things in this world as fundamentally mysterious. It was what made them interesting to me, worth exploring. And I now felt fully authorized to indulge my curiosity not by trying to resolve such enigmas—putting an end to inquiry—but to sustain attention on them, in many cases extending now over my lifetime.

It's not that mysteries cannot be "understood." Nor is language useless to that process. It is more that a mystery must be encountered first via an "experience"—which I believed back then and still do, despite the protestations of postmodernist ideologies, arises prior to and aside from words—that language can then explore along many paths without ever reaching a singular destination, a process that leads finally to "wisdom," a highly specialized form of knowledge that emerges after language has done its work, resists commodification, and, most importantly, never achieves finalization. I put those two words—experience and wisdom—in quotation marks because they are in their own right mysteries, to me at least.

So, what to say about this general human intolerance for such states of inner irresolution, often produced by what Naomi Klein calls, above, a "shock," which provokes a discomfort that demands relief by any "story" available, no matter how bizarre its narrative line? My favorite source for thinking about matters of this sort is John Keats, specifically what he famously called, in a letter to his brother George in 1817, "negative capability;" that is: "when [one] is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." In another 1817 letter, this one to Benjamin Bailey, he recommends "the authenticity [or later, truth] of the imagination," as the antidote for the inefficacy of "consecutive reasoning" to fathom the most

important and interesting matters that inevitably concern us in this life.

Keats may seem a remote and problematic source to go to here for several reasons: He's writing this stuff over two centuries ago at the height of the Romantic movement, which has long since passed its sell-by date. He mentions most of it briefly and offhandedly in these otherwise mostly personal missives, never following up with any in-depth explanations of these concepts, there or elsewhere. He was a poet, a suspect source of "truth" in Western philosophy ever since Socrates exiled poets from his Republic. And he was only 22 at the time, hardly a seasoned intellectual. Still, there is a brilliance to the insight that, to me, has an uncanny currency in a world that, on the one hand, now recognizes, as a matter of verifiable scientific fact, the material "uncertainty" (see Heisenberg's "principle") built into the fabric of the physical universe; and, on the other hand, is manically obsessed with relieving even the slightest twinges of psychic uncertainty with any sort of off-the-shelf "consecutive reasoning," no matter how detached from reality it might be. Better always to relax comfortably in the liminal spaces of irresolution—the true resting state of "reality" in my view—than to sacrifice sanity for the illusion of clarity or stability.

None of this is to suggest that inner states of irresolution produce confusion (nothing is knowable), cynicism (therefore nothing matters), or stasis (so all available options are equal.) Quite the opposite. They are ongoingly generative of new knowledge. Nor is it to say that closure is precluded. One can at any moment choose simply to stop inquiring into a situation or problem for any reason at all, or no reason at all. Time and mental energy are finite after all. It is, though, to say that deferring to "stories" provided by outside "authorities" that purport to fully explain the mystery at hand is a certain path both to delusion and the loss of personal agency.

### 3.



How then does each of these writers settle with such confidence on the main “problem” that afflicts the current moment, as well as their proposed “solution” to it? As is the case for all of us, their preferred paradigms are charted generally by a combination of murky personal and professional predispositions, akin to what Gadamer calls “preunderstanding.”

Chellis Glendinning, for example, is a psychotherapist by training. So she tends to see problems as a function of largely unconscious psychological processes induced by traumatic experiences, both personal (in her case a childhood riven with incestuous rape) and cultural (the analogous rapes of Indigenous peoples by the forces of “Empire.”) It is only now, in retrospect, that I am beginning to disentangle her two books, which, with all the others, tended to blur into one cosmic conversation pertinent to personal agency.

*Off the Map*, combines autobiography with a close examination, *a la* cultural studies, of cartography as an instrument of oppression. To the extent that it proposes a “solution” it is via a call to resistance and activism in response to imperialism. *My Name is Chellis*, written earlier, provides a more theorized context for understanding her overall project. Seen through the longest lens, the shift from a transitory (hunter-gatherer) to a sedentary (farming) lifestyle inevitably reshaped attitudes toward “land” and the way we humans occupy it, gradually skewing things toward the current conventions, with increasingly deleterious effects from her point of view. The most obvious ways to get back on a good path again—going back in time or returning to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle—are not available to us, of course, though the latter may become inevitable if we destroy “civilization as we know it” via unabated climate change. Why not, then, just give up and wait for our inevitable demise? Well, for one thing, that makes for both a sad life and a bad book. So there must be some other alternatives.

One of them is built into the personal narrative



component of her argument in *Off the Map*: activism right now, where one lives, to influence policy decisions around land-rights and land-transfer issues. But the one I want to focus on here is more conceptual, derivative from her training, i.e., finding ways to get into intimate touch with what she calls our personal “primal matrix.” Here’s how she describes what that is:

People have a natural state of being. It is variously known as “being integrated,” “human potential,” and “merging mind, body and spirit.” Taoist philosophy refers to this state as the “balance of yin and yang.” To Lakota (Sioux) Indians, it is known as “walking in a sacred manner;” to the Diné (Navajo), “standing in the center of the world.” I call this state of being our *primal matrix*: the state of a healthy, wholly functioning psyche in full-bodied participation with a healthy, wholly functioning Earth. (*Name*, 5)

Glendinning covers a lot of multi- and cross-cultural ground here, in the hopes I imagine that at least one of these potential sources for her term is familiar to the reader and can serve as a portal for understanding its nature and implications.

She goes on:

And what is this healthy state? From the perspective of the individual, it is a bodily experience, a perception of the world, and an attitude about being alive that is characterized by openness, attunement, wonder, and a willingness in the here and now to say YES to life. It is a sense of ease with who we are and fulfillment with what we do. (*Name*, 5-6)

So the primal matrix is both body and mind operating in what sounds to me much like the way Keats considers optimal. Unfortunately, her “map” for achieving this “healthy state” is almost as vague as his is. Understanding what it means in existential terms is no simple matter, absent some background in at least one or two of these discourses and/or some profound personal experience with transcendental/liminal states of being in the world.

For example, as soon as I read her definition, I instantly translated it into my own inner parlance, what I now call the



“kingdom of heaven” state of mind I often enter when I walk in the forest, and lately via various smaller-scale meditative techniques I deploy to counter daily anxieties and irritations. The woods-walking version of this came first, as a mode of personal experience, a deeply felt sense of communion with trees in particular, inner and outer worlds melding into one, before I had any name for it. Here’s a passage that describes one such event:

Every walk in this place [Woodard Bay] is emotionally meaningful to me in some way: soothing, restorative, illuminating, relaxing, thought-provoking, etc. Every now and then, though, one of them is literally ecstatic, in the etymological sense of that word: I am released from “myself” and enter into a deep sense of communion with everything around me. There are no boundaries between and among us any longer. It is a wonderfully liberating feeling. The phrase that kept repeating in my head today was “I love you,” and I couldn’t tell whether it was coming from the inside-out toward the forest or outside-in toward me. They were in fact exactly the same thing. (*waking*, 62-63)

I have experienced this state of being from time to time for as long as I can remember, and I’ve had an assortment of names (or no name at all) for it along the way. It wasn’t until I began to study early Christian literature—the New Testament and especially the lost gospels—with an exclusive focus on what Jesus actually said, my personal jam, that I finally chose my preferred moniker, this “kingdom of heaven” trope that both I and Jesus and many others understand is not out there, either in the remote past or the remote future, but right here and now, available at any instant for anyone when they are willing to accede to the state of “uncertainty” that transcending one’s personal identity in favor of a universal one—a routine existential condition in Indigenous cultures but now so alien to modern cultures—brings into being. While my trope may have a religious ring to it, what I believe is in most of its aspects decidedly heretical in relation to Christian doctrine (as is so much of what Jesus actually

said in most “organized” denominations these days). So to me it is almost entirely absent any conventional theological connotations.

Elaine Pagels’ book is a good entry point into this particular discourse for conceptualizing what having/inhabiting a “primal matrix” (she never uses that term of course) is and feels like. She is an accomplished scholar in religious history as well as an ardent Christian, which inflects her analysis of the lost gospels, where Jesus’ concept of “the Kingdom of God” (capital K and G) as a self-induced state of being is ubiquitous, the organizing motif of the *Gospel of Thomas* especially. Pagels summarizes it this way:

So, according to the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus ridiculed those who thought of the “Kingdom of God” in literal terms, as if it were a specific place: “If those who lead you say to you, ‘Look the Kingdom is in the sky,’ then the birds will arrive there before you. If they say ‘It is in the sea,’ then . . . the fish will arrive before you. Instead it is a state of self-discovery: . . . the Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to yourself, then you will be known, and you will realize that you are the sons of the living Father.” (128)

The inside/outside dynamic Jesus describes is crucial to the gnostic understanding of the Kingdom, as it is for me. Once the customary, taken for granted, boundaries between those two dimensions of being begin to blur, and then disappear entirely, both merging naturally and intimately, the kingdom (small k for me) is immediately at hand, as in right now, the only “place” it can ever truly exist. This is a radical departure from the way the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and ultimately Church orthodoxy, define the Kingdom (capital K): in remote temporal terms, first the advent of Jesus himself as an historical person and then a futural moment of harmony and/or cataclysm.

Glendinning also mentions Taoism as a potential touchstone for understanding what the primal matrix is and does, though she doesn’t say which features of Taoist thinking are most pertinent, aside from the yin-yang balance. One of



them, from my point of view at least, is the conception of cosmic creation, and therefore “nature,” as a feminine process, foundational to the thought of Lao Tzu and Zhuangzi. Many of the lost gospels share a similar point of view. As Pagels explains:

The *Apocalypse of Adam*...tells of a feminine power who wanted to conceive by herself:

...She came to a high mountain and spent time seated there, so that she desired herself alone in order to become androgynous. She fulfilled her desire, and became pregnant from her desire. . . (54)

Along the same lines:

Followers of Valentinus and Marcus [second century gnostics] ...prayed to the Mother as the “mystical, eternal Silence” and to “Grace, She who is before all things,” and as “incorruptible Wisdom” for insight (*gnosis*). (54)

And again, a “voice” in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* cries out: “I am androgynous...I am the Womb [that gives shape] to all” (55).

The female figure as either an important or the primary human protagonist is also a common feature of gnostic narratives, as in this case, from *Authoritative Teaching*, in which “The rational soul longs to ‘see with her mind, and perceive her kinsmen, and learn about her root...in order that she might receive what is hers...’”, thereby enacting the most essential aspect of gnostic thinking: self-initiated seeking for the self-knowledge that is the key to entering the Kingdom (112). There are many more such examples in various gnostic texts, and the analogy to Taoist ideas is unmistakable. Several other contextual sources for Glendinning’s concept are Indigenous and Native philosophies, many of which tend either partially or ardently toward matrilinear and feministic power dynamics.

It may seem a stretch to transition from such matriarchal paradigms to the dialectical thinking of Marxist and post-Marxist philosophers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, already by then

at least a couple of millennia into the toxically patriarchal cultural systems that characterize Western societies, made even more so by the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century formation of the Catholic Church, during the great gnostic purges, Pagels' historical wheelhouse. But she actually provides a transitional figure for me to get to Bakunin's version of a "primal matrix." As she says:

Many gnostics, then, would have agreed in principle with Ludwig Feuerbach, the nineteenth-century psychologist [a prominent influencer for both Marx and Engels] that "theology is really anthropology" ... For gnostics, exploring the *psyche* became explicitly what it is for many people today implicitly—a religious quest. Some who seek their own interior direction, like the radical gnostics, reject religious institutions as a hindrance to their progress. (123)

And further,

Some gnostic Christians went so far as to claim that humanity created God—and so, from its own inner potential discovered for itself the revelation of the truth. (122)

Bakunin obviously believes the first part of that statement. It is just with the effects of that process of invention that he takes issue. While Feuerbach famously said that "if man is to find contentment in God, he must find himself in God," Bakunin might say that "if man is to find contentment in history, he must find himself in collective relationships with others." The God-part, from his point of view, no matter the best intentions of the practitioner, inevitably ends up creating a cohort of human god-substitutes as overseers who aspire to enslave the masses.

To the extent that Bakunin has something akin to a "primal matrix" or "kingdom of heaven" in his system, I'd have to say it is in his concept of "Liberty" (capital L), which weaves in and out of his critique as a heroic prime mover toward what he calls the "real emancipation of the proletariat" (118). As he says:

The first word of this emancipation can be none other than



“Liberty,” not that political, bourgeois liberty, so much approved and recommended as the preliminary object of conquest by Marx and his adherents, but the great human liberty which, destroying all the dogmatic, metaphysical, political, and juridical fetters by which everybody today is loaded down, will give to everybody, collectives as well as individuals, full autonomy in their activities and their development, delivered once and for all from all inspectors, directors, and guardians. (118)

This is his utopia, historically possible if approached via the right path. He goes on:

The second word of this emancipation is “Solidarity,” not the Marxian solidarity from above downwards by some government or other, either by ruse or force, on the masses of the people; . . . but that solidarity which is on the contrary the confirmation and the realization of every liberty, having its origin not in any political law whatsoever, but in the inherent collective nature of man . . . (118)

That’s a grand vision, the “inherent collective nature of man,” a “kingdom come” in its own right. In Marx’s system the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is a sort of utopia with which the dialectic of history will ultimately culminate. For Bakunin, a collective anarchism—an interesting paradox in its own right—can bring that about right now. The specific sort of freedom being described here—via collectivity—is different from the gnostic version, which arises from individual enterprise and strives for transcendence from both cultural binaries and externally imposed authority. Nor is it identical with Glendinning’s primal matrix, which begins with self-inquiry and strives to exceed individual identity in the service of others, yes, but even more so of the natural world, a figurative ground absent in Bakunin. What he does share with both of them, times ten, is a deep distrust of any “of the vicious fictions used by the established order—an order which has profited from all the religious, metaphysical, political, juridical, economic and social infamies of all times—to brutalize and enslave the world” (136).

As was the case above, the book most difficult to coordinate with the others in this regard is Ha Jin's account of Li Bai's life. I am quite sure it does, I just have no idea yet how. So I'll do what I normally do in situations of irresolution like this: start to write and follow the path the writing opens. I think I'll open with one of the ongoing questions I had in the back of my mind as I read this extraordinarily detailed account of a life lived over a millennium ago: To what degree should I accede to Jin's narrative line as an accurate template and not a superimposed trope for the life of a misunderstood artist? I don't mean to question his methods or authority. He spent years culling foundational materials to create this elaborately detailed tapestry, materials I have neither the time nor the inclination, or most likely even the opportunity, to review. Jin is a fastidious, meticulous and consummate professional in that regard. This has more to do with how individual human lives are made sense of from the outside in, and the degree to which that sense accords with how they are made sense of from the inside-out.

My prior experience with Bai's work was exclusively through his poetry. He is one of my favorite poets. I had read a lot of his poems with care and enjoyment, even wrote a book of my own that is a poetic conversation between us. On that basis I concocted my own Li Bai, one with a foot clearly planted in the "heaven" he refers to repeatedly in his poems, often via the figure of the "star river," the Milky Way. Jin focuses more on his other foot, planted firmly in the "real world" of professional ambition, marriage, family, etc., all of which has the stereotypically troubled aspect that characterizes so many human lives when viewed in retrospect. As I explained above, Jin overlays a distinct pattern on Bai's lifeline, one with many consecutive iterations: He works his way into a relationship or situation that might lead to his desired goal—a position or commission in the hierarchy of power in his moment—then either by arrogance or bad judgement or the built-in duplicity of the social order or



simply the vanity and stupidity of those empowered to facilitate his advancement, it all comes a cropper.

My Bai's lifeline, built up on the basis of his poetry, seemed both much less orderly in its sequences and much more consistent emotionally. He had such a deep relationship with the natural world, for example, the material source for his imagery, a "primal matrix" of the highest order, inside and outside merging in the most heartfelt ways. He is, yes, afflicted by loss, but more often the kind that arises from love than from ambition. To me, he had a genius not for the exaggerated display that might advance a career but for creating intimate images that almost anyone can relate to (though Jin makes clear he did a lot of the former as well.)

So which of these is more accurate? Well, of course, both are essential for understanding who Bai was and where he placed his "faith." And there may be many other angles of entry as well. Every human life, no matter how far "off the grid" it is lived—and Bai was eternally in motion, chronically itinerant, always seeking his next opportunity, until his final years, spent in contemplative seclusion—still takes place in this world, locked intimately into the fabric of its particular historical moment and its particular cultural context. It seems that Bai had his feet equally balanced between the diurnal scrum of power politics and the eternal "heaven" of his imagination, both of which he experienced on a grand scale, the former as a series of chronic failures, the latter as an array of spectacular successes, at least in his after-life.

On the diurnal side he encountered the chronic incapacity of human society to recognize artistic greatness in its own time, a parsimony rooted in the general resistance to rewarding the foot planted in "heaven" (always a threat to the status quo) instead of the one planted on "earth." Some radical poets, like William Blake and Walt Whitman persist and survive with modest recognition. Others, like Emily Dickinson and H.D. remain either entirely invisible or way under the radar during their own lifetimes. There are



exceptions of course, like William Wordsworth or T.S. Eliot. But there are many nameless others, I'm sure, who never achieve any acclaim at all either in their own time or in our "histories."

This highlights the almost inevitable friction that characterizes a lived life, one's personal desires or ambitions abrading against the cultural norms of the immediate historical/cultural/social moment. For most, the latter wears down the former until it fits, personal vision meshing with established norms, leading to success, even fame, or just to normalcy, a settling into relative comfort. For creative figures generally out-of-kilter with their historical moment, the former grinds away at the latter, leading to frustration, even duress.

The interesting thing to me about Li Bai, especially if I add my poetry-based narrative line to Jin's, is that he lived on both sides of this frictional surface: penalized while he lived, apotheosized only after he died, an irresistible force straining always against an immovable object, until, with his passing, there was only one foot left planted, the one in the heaven of his poems. And this is my connection, via his poetic "heaven," to the "kingdom of heaven," to the "primal matrix," and to the most precious sort of "Liberty" one can find in a world that both celebrates it (occasionally) and undermines it (almost always).

All of this is simply to say that there are many routes available to rise above the infernal oppressions of our historical moment. What these authors share in common is a profound and hard-earned distrust for externally imposed, state-sponsored orthodoxies (in relation to imperialistic ambitions, priestly elites, intransigent ideologies, or autocratic political dynasties) designed to enforce social order, quite often via the inherent slipperiness of language, at the expense of the "masses" (whether Native inhabitants, churchgoers, workers, poets, or "thinking" folks just trying to get by.)



## 4.

I had such a wonderful walk this morning, down the hill from my house along the narrow, mazy streets and lanes of Olympia's Eastside to and then along the boardwalk that wraps around Budd Bay downtown, a three-mile circuit that takes me about an hour now, including multiple stops to take photos of whatever along the way happens to catch my attention or take my breath away. Olympia is farther north than any place I've lived before, so the daylight portion of these late-fall days becomes more and more abbreviated, 8+ hours a day this time of year. I don't necessarily mind darkness, temperamentally, but I prefer light, especially bright sunlight, and find myself craving that more and more as the years pass. Summertime here is idyllic in that respect, weeks and weeks of pristinely sunny days that seem unending, earth leaning toward the sun, the opposite aspect of northerliness in relation to daylight. By contrast, when the earth tips back, fall and winter days tend more and more toward the gray, many mornings a high ceiling of sun-blurring clouds just sitting there, sometimes amplified by dense ground-level fog. This murkiness can last until mid-late morning or even early afternoon. Today the sun was out in all its glory from the get-go, radiant, exhilarating. The sky was light blue, wall to wall, with the now waning moon, halfway to "new," floating like a semicircular slice of ice, brilliantly backlit in a perfectly still sea. At the "shore" of this blue sea, just above the Olympia skyline, huge mounds of curvaceous cumulous clouds rested, as if a vast range of rolling ridges, peaks rounded off with deep layers of new snow, had come to rest on the rooftops, their shapeliness mesmerizing, seeming to float weightlessly on the hardscapes they highlighted.

I was thinking while I walked about the "distrust for externally imposed, state-sponsored orthodoxies" that my five books foreground, specifically in relation to an ongoing drama that should be of concern to all of us in the academic community. Which gets me to the final point I want to

make: how “the inherent slipperiness of language” can take on a more sinister aspect in a cultural moment like ours, already off the rails, not just in relation to conspiracy theories or cults, which use language to alienate followers from any reality that resides outside of language, but in the political arena and news media. Right, left, no matter, it is all a sort of Orwellian trance that keeps us riveted on whatever the daily debacle happens to be, agitated and disempowered all at once, waiting for the news-cycle to click over to tomorrow, hopeful it will be less horrifying, though it never is or can be given the obsessive need for both politicians and the media to keep our attention riveted on this reiterating car crash on the other side of the freeway, *ad infinitum*, until we lose control ourselves, look for the next exit ramp to Rabbit-Hole City where we can pick one to back into.

About two weeks ago three college presidents from among the most elite universities in America—Penn, Harvard, and MIT—testified before Congress with what are now notorious, even disastrous, consequences. Two have since resigned, the other is hanging on precariously. I asked myself this morning, how could such a thing happen? And there was no way for me to explain it outside the parameters of this matter of conspiracy theories and cults. On one side was the primary Congressional interrogator, Elise Stefanik, the formerly moderate New York congresswoman who rebranded as MAGA during Donald Trump’s presidency. She was clearly primed for a stereotypical far-right kneecapping moment, asking each president in sequence: “Does calling for the genocide of Jews violate [your college’s] rules or code of conduct on bullying and harassment?”—a simple question that each president answered tentatively and seemingly evasively.

All Stefanik wanted, or would accept, was a yes/no answer, and it would seem then, on balance, that the most appropriate answer would be, simply, yes, as a form of dangerous or threatening hate speech, for example. Case



closed. My question is not why Stefanik behaved as she did. She is simply playing to her type: a right-wing ideologue more interested in scoring points with her “base” and getting publicity than solving problems. My question is why these very highly educated and intelligent young leaders were not prepared for this kind of a bushwhacking, or why in the moment, they weren’t clever enough to see that just saying “yes” was the only way out of an otherwise unavoidable abyss of cultural lunacy. Some have suggested that they may have spent too much of their prep time with university lawyers, borrowing their “slippery” discourse for their talking-points. I think it’s more complicated than that.

I have to go back a ways, to the 1970s, to get on the runway toward my answer. I started graduate school in the early 70s. All of my preparation, or if you prefer an insider term, “formation,” as a critical reader beforehand, from grade school through college, was under the terms of the modernist agenda, which fetishized text-based reading practices, a very specific kind of “close reading” that expressly, by definition, must set aside the autobiographical predilections of the author (the “intentional fallacy”) and the reader (the “affective fallacy”). At that historical moment a dramatic sea change was taking place in relation to critical ideology in the culture at large. Emergent was what would very shortly come to be called “postmodernism” most broadly, or, even more specifically, gesturing to its roots in French philosophy and theory, poststructuralism and deconstructionism, et al., all of which shift the balance to the reader-side of the interpretive equation. Those monikers are widely recognized now, if not very well understood at the level of practice. They were not, for me and my generation, in the early 70s, when Michel Foucault’s work first entered the American academy via translation. And shortly thereafter, Jacques Derrida’s.

I realized very quickly that I was not well-prepared, via my deeply ensconced critical habits, to succeed in this new marketplace of ideas, that I would need what was called back

then a “retooling.” Big time. As in recognizing how and why everything that had been taken for granted about literary-critical reading practices for two generations—ever since the rise of the New Criticism, a weirdly indigenous American expression of the text-valorizing approaches that evolved first among post-WWI British scholars and poets, at least some of whom, like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Hilda Doolittle, were American ex-patriots—was now outmoded. All of a sudden, this array of now-new approaches, radically reader-based, anathema to the New Criticism, were all the rage. The old order collapsed suddenly and completely, as old orders always do when mutually irreconcilable systems collide at volatile historical moments, the new vanquishing the old. And no moment in my lifetime was more volatile than that one, the established social order coming apart at the seams in America’s streets: race, gender, sexual identity and class being renegotiated down to the ground. Changing our preferred ways of reading was significant, but hardly the most urgent concern at that moment.

Like the rest of my cohort seeking to “professionalize” ourselves in durable ways, I set about retooling myself with a vengeance. I had an easier time than most, I suppose, because I already believed that the extant critical ideology was backward and bankrupt, unsuited to my instinctive preferences. So I was happy to welcome an alternative powerful enough to demolish it, even as I found it comparably self-aggrandizing in its ambitions, similarly unsuited to my preferences. The fact of the matter, I knew, was that if I wanted a career in my field, I would have to become adept with these new instruments.

The most salutary side-effect of this transition—the new one now in place, the old one still there, as all “first” systems are, though “under erasure”—was my immediate recognition that all critical systems, and therefore all ideological systems, were historically contingent, intrinsically local, relatively short-lived (a couple of generations in this case), and quite



arbitrary, the winners among the several contestants during those relatively brief windows of cultural collapse—like the post-WWI era, when modernism took command, and the post-Vietnam war era, when postmodernism replaced it—where foundational change not only becomes possible but inevitable.

The internal mechanics of this are quite simple: When one's deeply held belief system falls apart and must be replaced, one understands down to the bones the fundamental duplicity of ideologies, the way a divorce or getting fired alters one's sense of the inviolability of established cultural contracts forever. They are no longer eternal verities—which is how they announce themselves—but paper tigers, really, there and gone once the next match is lit. In other words, they feel very much like the “cults” I am trying to write about here, ardently supported to the preclusion of alternatives until some crisis comes along to wake everyone up again. And once the new version becomes fully ensconced, which takes about a generation in the case of literary-critical ideologies, they will not be recognized as such by anyone. Just the way things are, should be, and always will be.

The specific “next-and-new” in my critical reading scenario was in that regard, I knew, exactly the same as the one it was working to replace: It would be there for a while and then be dismantled by another powerful alternative already “slouch[ing] towards Bethlehem to be born,” as Yeats says in “The Second Coming.” A problem, though, arises for those indoctrinated during the second generation of such a movement. Their formations, from grade school on, have been univocal in critical terms, as mine were in the 50s and 60s. This now fully established orthodoxy is singular, unitary, without competition; so it will be received unquestioningly. There is simply no competitor on the scene, or even the horizon, to challenge it. All of the college presidents testifying before Congress last week were “formed” in this second generation of the postmodernist era. And their answers were

couched in that discourse, one immediately legible to an insider; but sounding ludicrous to someone operating in the framework of an entirely different “cult,” like MAGA politics.

One can blame arrogance for that disconnect, of course. But I blame generational luck, bad or good, depending on your perspective. Anyone who experienced the destabilization of their inner compass, as I did 50 years ago, would not just be prepared for, but would fully anticipate, exactly the sort of ambush Stefanik set up. And would have answered with some version of “yes, as a form of hate speech that is threatening and dangerous,” which might at least deflect, perhaps even defuse the explosion the question was designed to set off.

This highlights one of the other effects of the postmodernist emphasis on discourse and the relativism of readerly responses it promoted. If the only realities are discursive, language can easily be dissociated from the “truths” that come before it (the experience and observations that produce verifiable facts, evidence, etc.) or after it (action and the presumption that one will live up to one’s “word.”) I have called out this unintended side-effect repeatedly over the years, arguing that it helped to create the conditions for the current fetishes for alternate facts, gaslighting, witch hunting, fake news, disinformation, and outright lies that we basically take for granted as foundational to our public discourse. Those things would be, and were, considered intolerable offenses in the context of modernist systems, which is why Richard Nixon was forced to resign for much less egregious offenses than Donald Trump, who may well be reelected! In fact, I believe there would be no MAGA movement right now were it not for postmodernist critical ideologies, which laid the foundation for these ongoing sacrifices of truth to power. Their versions are of course bastardized mis- or non-readings of the originals. But so few outside the academy have read the originals that they can’t be challenged in a way that even makes sense to them.

Those who *have* read them must find new ways, now



more than ever, to fight back with resolve and integrity: in this case, for example, before not after the forced resignations—while there is still a recognized position of authority to speak from, as these three might have, both individually and collectively, once they realized their fates were sealed, by calling out the tacit misogyny (why only female presidents?) and racism (one of whom is black?) that seemed to me to be baked into these proceedings, alluding to those among Stefanik’s “posse” who deploy anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, and even genocide-endorsing discourse, some expressly, more often of the dog-whistle variety, including Stefanik’s chief “handler” Donald Trump—and then later, at the institutional level, by standing ground in the face of such bear-baiting tactics. And it would be a good opportunity to call attention to the denotative difference between characterizing one of these apparently correlative modes of hate speech as “anti,” i.e., oppositional, and the other as “phobic,” i.e., fear-based, a “slipperiness of language” with significant implications and consequences. These are not moments for knuckling under to bullies; they are the “Have you no sense of decency” moments that finally brought Joe McCarthy’s equally self-aggrandizing campaign against good people back in the 50s to a screeching halt.

That none of these presidents, nor the universities they served, were able to do this says something about the dire state of the “idea of the university” in the American culture. Again, I had to ask myself, how could something like this happen? And once again, I have to go back a ways to get on the runway toward an answer. I worked in a wide range of university cultures for almost 50 years, starting in the early 70s when innovative new programs and institutions began to pop up and prosper, state support for public education was impactful, and a teaching-nourished vision of what higher education could do and was for flourished, all fruits of the radical reform that spread across



the wider society in the late-60s. Within a decade, the historically conservative nature of the American university as a cultural institution reasserted itself and gradually clawed back the status-related powers it had lost in this moment of creative vibrancy. By the late-1990s, that battle was over, a top-down corporate model having reshaped higher education in fundamental ways, especially in R1 universities, which, not coincidentally, ushered in the era of bank-financed student debt that now encumbers so many college graduates.

Where I worked, the administrative cadre expanded dramatically as the teaching cadre contracted, more and more tenure-stream positions transitioning to part-time and adjunct lines. The authority that faculty once shared collaboratively in governance matters was significantly diminished and power was translated to the upper echelons, as it is in all “organized” institutions, religious, political or corporate. At the same time, the teaching/research binary became more and more skewed toward the latter—often with the enthusiastic support of the most elite faculty, who promoted a book-fetishistic approach to publication and demeaned teaching as a (p)raise-worthy credential. It is time to begin to reverse that dysfunctional trend, to recover some idea of “the good” in our idea of the university, where the “primal matrix” should not be in the board room but in the classroom. Period.

I don’t think “the powers that be” have any idea how much they owe to the “elite” academic culture they take such pleasure in skewering. Without the latter, none of the former would have their ground to stand on; or more accurately, they would have to find some real ground to stand on, one where words were still connected to meanings and consequences. It’s not that one is a cult and one isn’t. They both are. As is every other ideological system that seizes the public imagination and exiles all competitors via whatever is the currently acceptable mechanism for enforcing heresies to aggregate



power. The academic culture does this quite as well as popular culture does. It just sounds a lot fancier as it goes about it. The proper response is not another cult, but “actual thinking.”

I’ve tried along the way here not to delimit too much what this actual thinking might look like, which will be different for everyone, one of the wonderful truths about personal agency: As long as you keep it, you retain the authority to define what it means both for what you say and what you intend to do with what you say. There are many different ways to characterize what words “mean.” In the current political and social media arenas there is a tendency toward dismissing even the most egregious verbal affronts as “just language,” therefore inconsequential. Lindsey Graham did exactly that yesterday, in exactly those terms, as he poo-pooed the idea that Donald Trump’s reference to immigrants “poisoning the blood of our country,” a direct draw from Adolph Hitler’s hit list, was offensive. His advice was not to listen to the words but “to get it right,” which in this case could mean many things, all of them bad.

This disregard for the importance of one’s words is so chronic we hardly blink at such an outlandish excuse for them. The antidote is one I’ve noted repeatedly over the years: behaving routinely as if our words are promissory, encapsulated in the everyday phrase I prefer: “keeping one’s word,” which elevates the concept of “word” from an externally inherited ideological gesture to an internally generated ethical imperative, one that presumes the connection I mentioned earlier between experience and wisdom, with language not as the end but the means to get from one to the other, a way of thinking that has become so dissociated from public discourse as a precondition that someone like Lindsey Graham actually sounds reasonable to many while he whitewashes this frightening fascist trope.

I’ve tried in this essay to enact a way of reading that breaks through the invisible walls that tend to separate, via literal “covers,” one book from another—a de-siloed way

of reading in other words, to use another concept from “systems” discourse—one that seeks to find common ground rather than to highlight difference. On a deeper level, this promotes a broadly metaphoric habit of mind that looks for connections where none were necessarily intended, as in the case of my five books, or where they were intentionally obfuscated, as in the case of Lindsay Graham’s comment.

Siloed reading has many benefits, of course, and I don’t mean to dismiss them. But in a cultural moment, like ours, that fosters cultish thinking—in relatively innocuous ways sometimes, from the self-help industry, which promotes competition among approaches, often leading readers on an endless, unhelpful merry-go-round ride from one to another to another, to the more insidious forms of dogmatic ideology that have instigated, on the political side, the slow-motion civil war we are now enduring in our country or, on the religious side, anything from random acts of terroristic violence to outright genocide, all in the name of spiritual movements designed to promote peace—developing this habit of mind, this way of thinking, is especially crucial, for our own personal sanity at least, and, perhaps, in time, for creating communities capable of functioning collaboratively. More broadly, I believe it can help to restore some semblance of integrity between language and meaning, which, for me, arises inevitably when I say what I mean with care and mean what I say with care, which sounds like a cartoon version of Doctor Suess’s elephant, I know. But that cartoon is way smarter in every respect than whatever one was playing in Lindsey Graham’s head when he opened his mouth to speak yesterday.

Something utterly unpredictable became visible to me when these five books coalesced into one, simply by approaching them at a systems level, what my dream told me to call quantum reading. From that vantage point, each of these author’s problem/solution paradigm proffers one potentially legitimate alternative among many, instead of the



only viable one. And I can enjoy a condition of intellectual liminality that makes it impossible to devote myself utterly to any singular -ism, a frame of mind that then makes all the available -isms visible as alternative options, that insists on personal agency and not externally imposed orthodoxy as the only real guide toward crafting a preferred position, which is not precluded by that multiplicity but actually becomes possible because of it.

That is its beauty not its deficit. That is the beauty not the deficit of liminality. That is the beauty not the deficit of a mystery. While there may be nothing that is ever The Absolute Truth, there are many, many things that are absolutely stupid. Culling those off makes it possible to approach along a tangent some potentially true things. Avoiding concessions to the stupid may seem like a pyrrhic victory when what you want is a “story,” a narrative line, some “consecutive reasoning” that removes all ambiguity, that answers all questions. But it is way better than running scared down the nearest rabbit hole from which there will be no exit.

This is the final stanza of John Keats’ famous bit of “reading” in the British Museum, his “Ode on a Grecian Urn:”

O Attic shape! fair attitude! with brede  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
With forest branches and the trodden weed;  
Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!  
When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,  
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

Thinking (which is always moving, “as doth eternity”) teases us out of thought (which is fixed, like those “marble men and maidens overwrought”—in both of its senses.) When our generation has passed, with all of its preferred explanations for how and why we ended up in such a mess, there will be

another and another “in the midst of other woe,” each seeking their own explanations.

Chellis Glendinning, the gnostic gospelists, Mikhail Bakunin, and Li Bai (especially late in his life, once he chose his preferred “heaven”) are afflicted by the same concerns you and I are: Things are not right. And none of them is necessarily wrong about how or why we ended up in such a mess, nor is any “solution” they proffer necessarily preferable. There are hundreds, thousands of other complainants scattered across history with similar tales to woe. None of *them* is necessarily wrong, either. Human civilization went off the rails forever ago—which is why we have imagined so many different Edenic paradises from which we have “fallen”—and did again today while we weren’t yet looking. No matter. We need to think to find any path forward from these otherwise dead-end moments. Reading provocative, well-written books, whether five or five thousand, trying to decipher some true things they might share in common, is among the ways we are still fortunate to have for doing that—despite the many book-burnings, -buryings and -bannings our civilization has endured—truth and beauty pulsing in quantum superposition across human history, then and now, there and here, separate and the same, one with many, many into one, waiting patiently for us to find our own personal moments of synchronicity. That may not be all we know on earth, or all we need to know, but it’s one of the best ways I know of to exercise my own personal agency and, if I’m lucky, to learn some new ways to fight back. I highly recommend it.



## Acknowledgments

With special thanks to Pamela Batzel and Mariolina Salvatori who encouraged me (actually told me!) to submit this essay for publication. And who “get” me, such a rare gift. And to Pat Donahue and Bianca Falbo who accepted it so instantly and graciously, “getting” it, another rare gift.

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