

In Memoriam, Steve Ryan (d. March 12, 2002)

I must try
not to cry.

My old friend
disappeared

just as
we were engaged in a conversation –
or was it, perhaps, an argument?

I cannot now remember;
it was long ago.

We conversed and argued about so many things:
art, literature, philosophy, religion, politics, sports, academic unions....

On that last occasion,

we were – of course – drinking.
He, a rum-and-coke,
3 ounces of rum, 8 ounces of Coke, tall glass, over ice, a slice of lime;
for me, it was a Grey Goose *L'Orange* gimlet,
three parts Vodka, one part Rose's Lime Juice, drop of simple syrup,
shaken with ice,
straight up in a Martini glass,
also a slice of lime.

Smiling at me with his Irish eyes,
he said something in favor of postmodernism;
Flashing at him out of my Dutch stubbornness,
I stood up in defense of pre-modernism.

He supported the Left and its aspirations;
I lashed out at the Left and its agitations
and pushed the "Right" view of things.

He hit me with a series of accusations –
about how the Right is indifferent to the sufferings of the wretched of the earth;
about how the Right is bad for the natural environment;
about how the Right is (really) racist and sexist and
pro-gun and
all sorts of other bad things.

I was just in the process of proving to him
that he was all wrong,

when he up and simply disappeared,
and was gone.

I never got to make my point!

I'll have to take it up with him again
in some other place,
at some other time.

Zen Metaphysics and the Big Encounter

Where the only constant is change,
what is real?

Shunyata?
Tathata?

How can a fish in water be thirsty?
What does it thirst for?

Tathata?
Shunyata?

When I entered the great purple cavern long ago,
and heard the music therein booming,
I stood – or floated – in the presence of God,
before His might and glory.

God was there,
and yet could not be seen;
He was omnipresent,
and yet not located,
transcendent as well as immanent.

Tathata.
Shunyata.
Not there,
but surely there!

I was exposed,
laid bare, puny and unclean,
before the hugeness and perfect purity
which filled the booming cavern,
before the emptiness
which was overwhelmingly present there.

Shunyata. Tathata.

Process and reality; being and nothingness;
soul without body, admitted to the Presence,
confronted by the Absolute,
observed, regarded,
not necessarily judged and evaluated,
but exposed, revealed,
and yet not quite rejected,
allowed to remain, not cast out.

Shunyata.
Tathata.
Both.

How?

James Joyce's Mirror

I see
that you've seen me
seeing you
seeing me

And I also see
that there's no seeing
save seeing oneself
trying to see oneself
and failing
and seeing the failing
and then seeing
that there's no seeing oneself
save through the eyes of another

So:

I'm looking to you
in the hope of seeing myself
in the looking glass of your eyes

Nureyev and Fonteyn, Stan and Ollie

Nureyev and Fonteyn,
like Laurel and Hardy,
spun a web
whiffing down
into
a charming secret space
beneath
the stage
upon which the dance had been
performed

Losing track of time,
they drifted
without specific aim
into the
evening shadows,
touching the warm wind
as it enticed them
to follow
their hearts
into the ever-deepening darkness
of the oncoming night

And so
they fled
with blithe abandon
from the ordinary world
of work and worry
and found their way,
along with Stan and Ollie,
to the place
where
day in and day out
is
no more

And there,
they will dance,
with joy,

forever

Learning to Type

The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.

The lazy dog looked up.
He saw the bushy tail moving away from him.
He was dimly aware that he had been jumped over and wondered what to do, if anything.

The fox paused to peer back at the dog.
The dog was stirring, but still lazy.

The fox gritted his teeth in an attempted smile.
He was, despite himself, taunting the dog.

The dog, however, was unconscious of this subtlety and continued to gaze, blurry-eyed, in the general direction of what he took to be a bushy, moving rug.

He was still half asleep.

How could a rug jump over him?,
he wondered.

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I'll just have to keep on, he said.
I want to see it through
to the end.
Don't ask me why. I don't
know
why.

The night came on
like a menace;
no stars,
no
moon.

Have you a flashlight?,
he asked.
None could be found.
They tried matches,
looked for a candle,
found some straw,
lit that,
and used it until
it burned away.

The ashes smoked on the floor of the barn.
The smell was pleasant
and sad.
The wind whistled outside;
otherwise,
all was
silent,
except for their breathing.

They gave up
trying to find
or manufacture
a light.
Instead, they spread their blankets
on the floor,
lay down,
and tried to sleep.

The one was asleep before the other.
The night continued.
The other drifted
into a dream,
following his sleeping
companion.

[continued →]

They both slept
and
dreamed.

Or at least the one dreamed.

He dreamed
of standing on the cliffs
overlooking the valley where he lived
when he was a boy.
He dreamed of his
mother,
or was it his
grandmother?
They were standing together
on the cliffs,
looking southward,
searching the horizon
for some sign
of a homecoming.

The sun was rising —
in his dream
and outside the barn.
He awoke
and found that his
companion was already sitting up,
studying the pocket map
they had brought
with them.

Sound began
to emerge
outside.

They decided
that they might as well
move on.

1940s Redux

Sinatra,
swinging in the system;

I and orichetti with pork bracciole
at the table,

reading Mickey Spillane,
“My Gun Is Quick,”

finding Sherida there
in the ladies of the '40s —
tall, blonde, long dresses,
ready for romance —

Then the music changes — some guy with an Italian accent
singing “Love Story” — a real
come-down from Sinatra —
my mind snapped back
from the '40s to NOW —
Is it Andrea What's-His-Name?
The blind guy?

Then I return to Spillane in
the late '40s —
Mike hammer, the dolls,
the greaseballs —
right after World War II.

Sherida not born until 1960,
but grows up to be
a lady of the '40s —
the hair, the fancy dresses,
the glamour — What a girl!

Mickey, you missed this one!
Put her into a new novel
before the '40s are finally
over.

A CONTRADICTION
(for R.D. Laing)

I want to be free,
and I want you to be free.

I want to do what I want to do,
and I want you to do what you want to do.
I hope that you will want to do what I want you to do,
but if you don't want to do what I want you to do,
then I still want you to do what you want to do.

If you do what you want to do,
then you might do something that I don't want you to do,
which means
that you will be tramping upon my freedom
to want you to do what I want you to do.

And yet,
if you do what you want to do,
then you will be doing what I want you to do,
which means
that I will be thwarting your freedom
to want to do something that I don't want you to do;
and since I want you to be free,
I want you to do that you want to do,
even if you do something that I don't want you to do.

But
if you don't want to do what I want you to do,
then
I'll make your life miserable.

MORE TRAPS

I

I want you to be what I want you to be,
and you want me to be what you want me to be;
I don't want you to be what you are,
and you don't want me to be what I am.

Furthermore:

I want to be other than I am;
I want to be what you want me to be.

Also, I suspect that you want to be other than you are
and that perhaps you want to be what I want you to be.

Thus:

neither of us is satisfied with the other,
and both of us want the other to be what we want him to be;
and neither of us is satisfied with himself,
and both of us want to be what the other wants us to be.

Our inability to get the other to be what we want him to be,
and our failure to be what the other wants us to be
are both frustrating and infuriating.

I don't want you to be what you are,
and you don't want me to be what I am,
because what you are and what I am
frustrates and infuriates both of us.

I don't want to be what I am,
and you don't want to be what you are,
because what I am and what you are
frustrates and infuriates both of us.

But I can't be what you want me to be,
and I can't be what I want me to be,
and you can't be what I want you to be,
and you can't be what you want you to be.

Frustration and fury seem unavoidable.

[continued →]

II

I am not satisfied with you,
and you are not satisfied with me.

One of the reasons why I am not satisfied with you
is that you are not satisfied with me;
and one of the reasons why you are not satisfied with me
is that I am not satisfied with you.

I am not satisfied with you
because you can't be what I want you to be;
and you are not satisfied with me
because I can't be what you want me to be.

One of the things that I want you to be is satisfied with me,
and one of the things that you want me to be is satisfied with you;
but you can't be satisfied with me
because I can't be what you want me to be,
and I can't be satisfied with you
because you can't be what I want you to be.

This is both frustrating and infuriating.

I am not satisfied with myself
because I can't be what I want to be;
and you are not satisfied with yourself
because you can't be what you want to be.

One of the things that I want to be is satisfied with you,
and one of the things that you want to be is satisfied with me;
but I can't be satisfied with you
because you can't be what I want you to be;
and you can't be satisfied with me
because I can't be what you want me to be.

One of the things that I am not satisfied with in myself
is wanting you to be other than you are;
and one of the things that you are not satisfied with in yourself
is wanting me to be other than I am.

By wanting to stop wanting you to be what I want you to be,
I become dissatisfied with myself,
because I can't seem to stop wanting you to be what I want you to be;
and by wanting to stop wanting me to be what you want me to be,
you become dissatisfied with yourself,
because you can't seem to stop wanting me to what you want me to be.

[continued →]

Furthermore:

I am not able to stop wanting to stop wanting you to be what I want you to be,
and you are not able to stop wanting to stop wanting me to be what you want me to be.

Thus:

I am inevitably dissatisfied with myself,
and you are inexorably dissatisfied with yourself,
because neither of us can stop wanting what each of us wants
and because both of us want what we can't get.

It would appear, therefore, that our dissatisfaction with each other
can be traced to the fact that neither of us is satisfied with himself!

Can frustration and fury be avoided?

Looking back on oneself, taking pity

That poor little boy,
that poor little boy,

Georgie,

wandering through his early years,
his childhood, his early teens,

lost,
homeless,
unguided,
unprotected,

tying his shoes,

trying to save his dog, Snooky,

and failing.

Where is that little boy now?
Where has he gone?

He seems to be still here,
wandering,
looking,

hoping to go back to the Animal Hospital
with a dollar
to redeem his dog.