

from a day of lost trade only confirms what we already suspect about the structures of capitalist production: that these glossy shop-fronts do no more than force-feed passers-by with commodities the demand for which is itself manufactured. It is not only the high-end outlets such as Fortnum and Mason that we can do without (the rich can, of course, drive up the road to Harrods to buy their bread.) The fear of proprietors and managers unfortunate enough to be 'in' retail is an unusual one: that if we restrict the sales of their trinkets they are left with a surplus. For the capitalist, a surplus is equivalent to a loss. But what does the consumer (whose sovereignty we are expected to respect) gain through the purchase of that surplus? For all of the complaints against black bloc, no-one has moaned about not being able to buy a phone that Saturday.

The TUC march, meanwhile, did no economic damage — rather, it perhaps contributed to London's economy, with an influx of revellers and day-trippers flooding through the city's supermarkets and bistros. The March for the Alternative was a carnival like any other, ready to be wrung for profit.

#### 8. Where Next?

The 26th fades from view. In its place there looms the Royal Wedding: a new extravaganza for imbeciles, prepped for journalistic cathexis. Those journalists tremble with pleasure at the prospect of 'anarchists' crashing the vows. For militants who detest the creation of wretched, saleable spectacle, dates like this are irrelevant: the task is unification. But for most militants this just means that the grassroots mobilisation continues. *Pace* the bourgeois media, black bloc did not drop out of the

sky and straight through the windows of Topshop; nor did labour militancy end in 1985.

Effective political action against the cuts (rather than against their decorative reduction) is and will be criminal, because at the global level the economic administrators have made their decisions, and will brook no dissent from career-minded state politicians elected on populist platforms. Within the structural constraints of transnational capital, there is no good alternative. Reduction of the structural deficit should be 'spread over a number of years', writes Larry Eliot in his TUC-endorsed pamphlet. This is surely not the political aim of those engaged in struggle against the government. If the anti-cuts movement becomes a supplication before state and union bureaucracies, then its progress will be like extracting communism from a stone.

For those consciously involved in the anti-cuts struggle, rejecting the greyscale 'vision' of the socially concerned bourgeoisie means participating in grassroots organisation and arguing for militant and illegal direct action (though, given the extremely repressive nature of current trade union law, illegality will not equal militancy). This means arguing for strategic blockading, occupations, shut-downs, and tactical destruction of private property. That base-organising trade unionists and local 'service users' are not yet 'ready to hear' all this is an order dressed up as a psychological insight, grunted by patronizing bureaucrats from the pinnacle of their stepladders. The tacit paternalism of their claim is the natural complement to the TUC's argument that the 'correct' and Keynesian alternative to the cuts shall be administered by experts from above, and like that claim, it is fatal for an active

and effective class politics. A better society will only be durably achieved by the creation of a mass class acting for itself, ready to commit to mass direct action, no longer confined to high-street stores on Saturday afternoons but spreading like a fire throughout workplaces and across national borders.

*Alternatively*, we, 'all of us', can capitulate to the charade of opposition conducted by the Labour Party and the TUC, as they plot to oust the 'Con-Dems' as chief executors of capitalist decline.

Escalate is a collective of writers and activists from around the University of London. Brought together through protest, we come from a variety of political backgrounds but write and edit our work collectively. Anonymity frees us from reputation-seeking and ideological dead weight. We have no wish to contain or regulate the diversity of the movement. We are not its 'voice'. Our writing focuses on the current political situation: insofar as it learns from the past, it refuses nostalgia. We aim to provide analysis and critique that can inform the movement both practically and politically.

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# ...The Hindrance of Assembly Notes for a Tralfamadorian 'book'

## Robert (Bobby) Doohihan

### The Responsibility of Acknowledgement: a Disclaimer

The author of this essay is Ian Brotherhood, but he has chosen to adopt an alter-ego called Robert Doohihan (Bobby for short). Ian's first given 'Christian' name is Robert but he has never used it. Ian's father is also called Ian and his first given 'Christian' name is also Robert, but he was called Ian by his siblings and parents to distinguish him from his own father, who was also called Robert.

To be clear — the relevant Registers show that Ian Brotherhood, his father and grandfather were all Christened 'Robert', but only Ian's grandfather used the name, and no-one ever called him 'Robert' — he was referred to by friends and family alike as 'Bobby'.

Bobby Brotherhood may have been an attractive name in the early 20th Century, but by the sixties it sounded like a cabaret act, and by the nineties it was replete with potentially obscene inferences. Ian (this one) once worked in an office where he manned phones and had to spell/explain his name many times daily — he heard dozens of variations on his name, the most offensive of which was 'Dean Rubberglove'.

The experiences of 'Bobby' which follow are, for the most part, mirrored via the memory of Ian Brotherhood. However, Ian cannot comfortably set down the following as 'autobiography' — the stated intention of this project was to write 'a critical essay'. The subject of the essay was to have been another essay called 'The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism', by Jonathan Lethem, published in Harper's, February 2007. After submitting his

proposal, Ian realised that the essay he proposed to criticise was not conventional, and should not therefore, in the interests of fair-play, be conventionally criticised.

While pondering how best to tackle the proposed essay, 'Bobby' became a virtual assistant similar to the animated paper-clip which offers presumptuous advice on some computer software — he worked hard, helping Ian resurrect memories, sifting the real from imagined while aiming to nail associations between seemingly disparate images and reflections.

Ian Brotherhood is a cantankerous middle-aged unemployed father of two with no respect for pedants, sophists, and language-mangling panhandlers. Bobby (Robert) Doohihan is/was, a fairer, saner, more humane and optimistic incarnation of the same man.

So Ian asked Bobby to write this, and supervised him throughout. It is the outline of a Tralfamadorian 'book'. If you haven't encountered Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*<sup>1</sup> then you will not be familiar with Tralfamadore, its occupants, or their concept of 'book'. This quote may, therefore, be useful before proceeding:

"There are no telegrams on Tralfamadore. But you're right: each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message — describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no

moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time." (p.64)

### The Criticism of Motivation: a Russian Doll

Bobby reads Lethem's 'The Ecstasy of Influence' and doesn't know what to make of it. It's been described as 'a brilliant stunt, a high-concept attention-grabber'<sup>2</sup> but is it an essay?

The more Bobby wonders about plagiarism, influences, jokes, disguises, *trompe l'oeil*, trickery, magic, coincidence and synchronicity, the less he understands what 'The Ecstasy of Influence' is really about. Is it satire? A manifesto? A joke? Bobby tries to evaluate what he's learned from reading it. There's a lot of information, well presented, easily assimilable and entertaining, but the more Bobby tries to discern the subject of the piece, the more he finds himself thinking about Lethem — why did he do it? What was the point? Any teacher goes into a class knowing what the aim of the lesson is. What was the aim of Lethem's essay?

Bobby digs out some of the essays he remembers — the ones which affected him, taught him something.

Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal'<sup>3</sup> was all about the starving Irish eating their own children to help ease the dire poverty which was embarrassing their English cousins. That was hard-core satire. Pretty clear aim, point to make. Not easy to read, and less easy to laugh at, but Swift was in his sixties, the success of *Gulliver's Travels*

was already behind him – he had strong feelings on the subject, knew how he wanted to present them, then did it. Not everyone’s cup of tea, but an effective piece, still much-discussed and quoted.

Orwell’s essays? So many good ones to choose from, but Bobby picks one he hasn’t read for a long time – ‘Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool’<sup>4</sup>. Bobby’s familiar with a lot of Orwell’s essays and journalism, but can’t recall ever feeling uneasy about Orwell’s possible influences and motivations. (Maybe it’s because the Lethem piece is preoccupying him – he’s wary, hoping not to be tricked or tripped-up.) Then it clicks – Bobby is conscious of the presence of Orwell, can almost see him writing the piece, imagine the physical background, the undealt-with correspondence lying on the desk, the well-thumbed Shakespeare and Tolstoy volumes stacked behind the ashtray. Bobby finds himself querying Orwell’s use of specific phrases, wondering to what extent Orwell is plagiarising himself, attributing his own thoughts and feelings to Tolstoy, Lear and/or Shakespeare. And Bobby then sees himself frowning at Orwell’s essay, perhaps in the same way that Orwell frowned at Tolstoy, who had surely frowned disparagingly at Shakespeare’s Lear before turning the dark gaze to The Bard himself.

So much frowning.

It strikes Bobby that if he invited Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Jonathan Lethem, Orwell and King Lear around for a few glasses of Lambrini and a quiet smoke, they’d probably get on famously. But that cannot be. They would learn so much more about each other from just being together than they’d ever glean from studying one another’s work. And perhaps that’s why Bobby believes that writers should be anonymous – all of them. All writing should be encouraged and published and read, but the identity of the author should only ever be divulged (voluntarily) in the event of legal objections to offensive/damaging statements being committed to print.

As he compares ‘The Ecstasy of Influence’ with other essays, Bobby senses a burgeoning annoyance with Lethem. It seems that the piece is not about plagiarism, intellectual property, the dubious concept of ‘the commons’ etc – it is about how clever Jonathan Lethem is, and while that may be something worth noting, it doesn’t, in Bobby’s estimation, merit eight-thousand words of proof. Bobby knows he’s read something which describes essays like Lethem’s. It takes a long time to find it. It appeared near the beginning of Herman Hesse’s Nobel-Prize winning *The Glass Bead Game*<sup>5</sup>:

“They reported on, or rather ‘chatted’ about, a thousand-and-one items of knowledge. It would seem, moreover, that the cleverer among the writers of them poked fun at their own work. Ziegenhals, at any rate, contends that many such pieces are so incomprehensible that they can only be viewed as self-persiflage on the part of the authors. Quite possibly these manufactured articles do indeed contain a quantity of irony and self-mockery which cannot be understood until the key is found again. The producers of these trivia were in some cases attached to the staff of the newspapers; in other cases they were free-lance scribes. Frequently they enjoyed the high-sounding title of ‘writer’, but a great many of them seem to have belonged to the scholar class. Quite a few were celebrated university professors.”

## The Perception of Perspective: a Revelation

Nov 17th 2009 – Bobby watches the second of a three-part BBC arts programme called ‘The Art of Eternity’, presented by an art critic named Andrew Graham-Dixon. The hour-long programme is called ‘The Glory of Byzantium’.

Graham-Dixon goes to Greece to meet an icon-painter called Giorgios Kordas who is working on frescoes for a new Orthodox church in Beirut.

AGD explains that there are approximately 2,000 iconographers in Greece, the majority based in Athens, and 80% of their work is commissioned by the Greek Orthodox Church.

As Giorgios works on a portrait, GD asks him questions. The artist explains that icons are alive, that they have rhythm. AGD looks puzzled:

AGD: ‘I’m not sure what you mean.’

*Kordas quickly sketches a house – the backside up, front*

*side down. He then sketches a figure using the same method, projecting the visible rear outlines of the torso unnaturally close to the surface. As he is drawing, he uses his limited English to try and emphasise that he’s creating rhythm, looking for a balance between ‘the dynamics’. AGD becomes animated, as if he’s starting to realise something:*

AGD: In a sense the image is drawing out a cone...

GK: Exactly

AGD: ...into the world...I almost enter the space...the space of the image comes out.

GK: Pictorial space is in front of the icon and the spectator enters the pictorial space and the spectator becomes part of the icon.

AGD: Now that’s massively different from the Italian Renaissance type...

GK: It’s the opposite.

AGD: ...of pictorial space.

GK: It’s the opposite. Exactly the opposite.

AGD: So, in the Renaissance, the painting is a window and I want to go through there...

GK: Yes, yes...

AGD: Whereas the Byzantine and what, so to speak, what is the, what is the point?

GK: What’s the point? Why?

AGD: Why?

GK: That’s a good question. Why. Because in Byzantine tradition, ehm, which is very influenced by Orthodox theology, knowledge is participation. If you want to know God you have to participate in God so, ahm, if we want to know this iconic reality, we have to have a kind of participation in this reality. That’s why, when we paint the church, we have to create this kind of communion between the icons and spectators.

*VOICE-OVER: Listening to Giorgios, I really did feel that the penny had finally dropped. It’s not that this art doesn’t have perspective – it’s that it uses perspective in a different way. I’d responded to Byzantine art instinctively, but while I’d been walking around and looking at it, I hadn’t quite realised the extent to which it had been choreographing my movement, making me stand in a particular space within the cone shaped by its lines of force emerging from the images. I realised I had literally, as well as emotionally, been moved by this art.*

For Bobby, this documented moment, where an expert reaches a new level of understanding, is what the ‘essay’ is all about. It’s clear from the reaction of Graham-Dixon that the epiphany is not staged. By listening to the artist, the critic has learned, then communicated that fresh understanding to the viewer. Bobby believes that this programme may be one of the most important things he’s ever seen on television – if it was up to him, the insight gained by Graham-Dixon would be on the national news.

Icon painters never sign their work. They copy what has been done before, and it is considered offensive not to make those copies as faithful as the artist’s skill allows.

## The Tyranny of Exclusion: a Memory

Summer 1973: For a week every summer Bobby stays with cousins on the other side of the city, which, to a ten year old, might as well be the other side of the planet. It’s an exciting part of the school holidays, and they enjoy many adventures, most of which involve running away from real or imagined predatory gangs of older youths.

The cousins meet Bobby at the bus-stop for the start of their week – D is six months older than Bobby, but still 10. A is a year younger. As they walk back to the cousins’ house, they meet two of D’s classmates. They started to talk, and Bobby doesn’t understand anything they’re saying. Then they start talking about Bobby, and laughing. Bobby asks A what they’re saying, but he doesn’t know.

‘Hegee’s meggy ceggouseggin.’

‘Wheggat’s heggis neggame?’

‘Beggobeggy.’

‘Beggobeggy?’

‘Eggaye. Beggobeggy Deggoheggiheggan.’

They’re using ‘eggy’ language – inserting ‘egg’ before every sounded vowel. After some minutes of

tormenting Bobby they explain what they’re doing, and how useful it is for keeping conversations secret. All have been banned from using the code at home because their parents can’t understand it. Bobby tries to do it, but can’t. He struggles for three years to master eggy language, and by the time he has a handle on it he knows no-one who still uses it.

The significance of eggy language, for Bobby, has always been those three or four minutes of embarrassment and frustration, when he was excluded, made ‘other’ by a simple linguistic trick.

Many languages have their own version of ‘eggy’, most commonly used by youths in rebellious mode. In April 2002, BBC World Service reported that police in Parisian ‘banlieues’ were concerned that the argot used by disaffected youth was alienating them from agencies capable of ‘helping’ them – the linguistic trick seemed more sophisticated than ‘eggy’ language: the pattern involved swapping syllables and dropping whatever vowel remained e.g. ‘voiture’ became ‘tourvoi’, and the ‘oi’ was dropped, producing ‘tourve’, a neologism. To the uninitiated, the youths were speaking gibberish, but the latter achieved the exclusion they sought. For them, the code brought a freedom which could not be regulated, impinged-upon.

Lacanian philosopher Slavok Zizek<sup>6</sup>:

“Believing there is a code to be cracked is of course much the same as believing in the existence of some Big Other: in every case what is wanted is an agent who will give structure to our chaotic social lives.”

## The Value of Coprolites: an Analogy

Bobby thinks he’s found a useful analogy.

A coprolite is fossilised dung. Examination of these objects reveals the diet of the creature from which the material was ejected.

Close examination of texts can reveal the cultural diet of the author.

No creature can alter the composition of its excrement retrospectively, but authors can doctor evidence of their consumption by editing what they produce: an academic essay may be treated so that it appears to be a work of spontaneous creativity, or vice versa: a heartfelt rant may be disguised as objective analysis; a bold mission statement may become an innocuous series of non-sequiturs; an unremarkable prose passage may be judiciously re-presented in the form of free verse; personal liability for deeply held memories/opinions/desires may be shifted by using ‘objective correlative’; potentially libelous material may be rendered safely publishable by the application of formal disclaimers and careful avoidance of legally pertinent ‘facts’; responsibility for text can be effectively jettisoned by use of pseudonym, etc.

The coprophobic Jonathan Swift produced a corpus of work which literary dung-beetles have been swarming over for more than three hundred years.

In Glasgow in 1990, while the city was officially the European Cultural Capital, police arrested a man<sup>7</sup> for defacing properties in the city centre, especially around the Trongate area. The man was dressed as Al Jolson in full ‘blackface’ costume. He was arrested on the basis that he had been found loitering in a darkened area where the words ‘Al Jolson’ had been spray-painted across walls and pavements. No windows or vehicles had been targeted. He refused to give his real name and denied any wrongdoing. The desk sergeant briefly left the man alone while fetching a form – when he returned, someone had sprayed ‘Al Jolson’ across the surface of the desk. Despite being found to possess a large can of black aerosol spray-paint, the man denied any responsibility. The Al Jolson graffiti-spraying busker has now moved on, perhaps passed away – we will never know if he was also the person who, at the height of Glasgow’s 1990 celebrations, sprayed hundreds of dog turds in the city centre with gold paint. To this day, there are many Glaswegians who remember that more clearly than any of the hundreds of cultural ‘events’ which were held.

Bobby starts to compile a list of essays, trying to describe what form of excrement they might resemble. He classifies Orwell’s ‘Politics and the English Language’<sup>8</sup> as a healthy, well-formed stool; Norman Mailer’s *Cannibals and Christians*<sup>9</sup> as a

bourbon-scented heap which has been placed as a territorial marker; Hunter S Thomson's *The Great Shark Hunt*<sup>10</sup> is a roughage-free well-aimed blast of diarrhoea etc. Bobby's aim in compiling the list is to describe Lethem's 'Ecstasy of Influence' as a plastic joke-shop turd, but he abandons the exercise as ill-judged.

### The Fragility of Nostalgia: an Echo

Glasgow, April 1970: Bobby's house is sunny and busy, full of relatives. The smell of beer and tobacco is thick. It's Grand National day. Dad allows a collection of small change, and the newspaper is passed around, everyone taking turns to close their eyes and prick the list of runners with a needle. Bobby gets *Red Rum*.

The children get fed-up waiting for the race to start, go outside to play – when they return, Bobby is handed a tobacco tin containing almost one pound and fifty new pence.

The following year, Bobby pins *Red Rum* again. He doesn't know much about horses or gambling, but he knows there's no way the same horse will win again – he demands another chance with the needle but is denied. He starts crying and goes outside to sulk. When he returns he is handed a tobacco tin containing one pound and sixty-three new pence.

*Red Rum* remains the only horse ever to win consecutive Grand Nationals.

Tokyo, Japan, August 1991: Bobby is pushed. Hammered. Blooter. Pie-eyed. It's half-three in the morning and he doesn't have work the next day, so he's started on his third bottle of *Black Label* since the holiday week-end started, and is wallowing in homesickness. The television, muted, provides visual company, while the tape-deck is playing U2's latest album, *Achtung Baby*.

Onscreen, the Japanese equivalent of BBC2 has been showing back-to-back wildlife documentaries for the past two hours but is now playing a studio discussion – three academic-looking chaps, denim-clad and with varying arrangements of facial hair, are grouped facing a normal television which starts showing the last highlights of football action from the Celtic versus Rangers 1980 Scottish Cup Final.

Bobby was at that game, knows what happens when the final whistle blows. He crawls closer to the screen, catching brief glimpses of the national stadium's upper perimeter, hoping to pinpoint exactly where he was with his friends when they witnessed the riot which made headlines worldwide and led directly to the banning of alcohol inside all Scottish football stadia. No chance. He knows he was there, but the footage concentrates on the violence, the drunken fans charging towards each other, the entrance of the mounted police with truncheons, the volleys of urine-filled bottles colliding above the centre-line, the panicked commentary, the smashed faces. For no more than three or four minutes, Bobby slips back a decade, to that sunny day – when the studio discussion resumes, the learned guests taking turns to provide their analysis of the tribal beastliness just witnessed, Bobby tops up his glass and drinks to the memory of the friends he was with that day. There are no tears now because he doesn't feel homesick any more.

### The Illusion of Familiarity: a Horror-Story

Glasgow, Christmas morning, 1969: Bobby is six and a half years old. With his two younger sisters he sits amidst piles of crumpled wrapping paper as tiny coloured lights twinkle.

Bobby Senior is present. A rare event. The father is a chef who works split-shifts in one of city's largest Italian restaurants – he leaves for work two hours before the children are awake, and doesn't get home until midnight. The only time the children see him is on Sunday afternoons (he plays football with the restaurant team in the morning).

Bobby Snr has gathered the children together to face him. He crouches, holding a wrapped gift, and asks them to guess what it is. They don't know, but grow more excited as he tugs at the ribbon. The children want to help, but their father urges restraint, makes them wait as the small oblong is stripped of the holly-patterned paper.

The box shows a picture of a man. So far as

Bobby and his sisters are concerned, it is their father. The picture shows the man's face in close-up – beside it he is holding a hand-sized keyboard, a small electronic instrument called a 'Stylophone'. The man is Rolf Harris. He sports thick black-rimmed spectacles, a neatly trimmed goatee-style beard, and has dark bushy hair. His smile is warm, if a little exaggerated, eyes widened and magnified behind the lenses, his smile broad, teeth slightly askew but strong and presentable.

Bobby and his sisters look at the box, which their father is now holding close to his face. He is smiling in a new and unusual way, head awkwardly angled – they have not noticed before that his front teeth are slightly askew.

Rolf Harris has a very popular Saturday afternoon television show in which he sings and paints and dances, sometimes simultaneously. The children never miss it. He also plays strange instruments, and he doesn't sound like Dad when he talks. But Dad's never ever been in the house when Rolf Harris is on the telly. Dad and Mum find it amusing, as do passers-by when they're out walking – 'Hey Rolf! Play us your didgeridoo!'. This further convinces the children that their father is the same man who has been Number One on *Top of the Pops* for the past month with a song called 'Two Little Boys'.

To remove any final doubts, as Mum looks on, Dad slips the cover from the box, removes the instrument and uses a small pencil to elicit a throbbing, quivering rendition of the popular tune. Mum and Dad sing, hoping the children will join in.

Instead, starting with Bobby Jnr, they all start to cry.

Summer 2009, Glasgow city-centre: Bobby is sitting outside a trendy brasserie-style pub with a friend he hasn't seen for 17 years. The friend is Kenny, who now lives and works in Sardinia. They worked together in Tokyo, Japan, in the early nineties.

Over their first pint they discuss the fate of old friends, especially the fellow Glaswegians they knew from those years. Kenny produces his Blueberry gadget and summons a file of photographs from their shared years abroad. The first batch shows a happy group in a trendy Japanese brasserie-style Mexican themed pub.

'Check the state of Guy,' says Kenny.

Bobby, having forgotten his specs, raises the screen closer to check the image of their mutual friend, who, in 1992, sported the thick mane of carefully groomed lioness hair which happened to be en vogue.

'Jesus. I'd forgotten how bad that was. Rest of us aren't much better though eh?' replies Bobby.

The friends chuckle. Bobby sits back, passes the Blueberry back to Kenny, and as he does so, raises his face. Behind Kenny's right shoulder, advancing from left to right as Bobby sees him, is Guy.

'There's Guy there,' says Bobby.

Kenny, thinking Bobby is referring to the photograph, checks it again and laughs aloud.

'Aye, that's our Guy eh?'

Bobby taps Kenny on his left knee, then raises the same hand to point to where Guy is now moving away past Kenny's right shoulder.

'No man, there. There's Guy there.'

Kenny turns, sees the carefully gathered ponytail, the familiar sloping gait, and calls out 'Guy!' Guy turns.

'Get over here for a pint!' Kenny shouts.

Within ten minutes, with fresh pints in front of them, they establish that the photograph on the Blueberry was taken on the last occasion the three of them had been together in a pub.

Bobby believes in synchronicity, but he doesn't often get a chance to prove it. His favourite example is an anagram, and he uses it sparingly, never forgetting who he's shown it to. He doesn't know who discovered it, or how, but he's convinced that it is the equivalent of Toto tugging at the curtain to reveal the heel of the left shoe of the 'real' Wizard of Oz.

Here it is:

'A novel by a Scottish Writer'

is an anagram of

'Ivanhoe by Sir Walter Scott'.

Every time Bobby tells that to anyone, he repeats it often enough for them to get it, writing it out and scoring off the letters if proof is demanded, before looking the person straight in

the eye and saying, without smiling – 'What are the chances of that happening? Eh?' And every time he's done it, so far, the person shakes the head, widens the eyes, says nothing, and smiles.

### The Whatever of Thingamabob: a Whatchamacallit

April 18th 2010: Bobby has gathered together the snippets, memories and associations he'd like to present in his essay, but time is running out and he hasn't even started.

The desk is a mess. So much he wanted to get in there, but it'll never happen. There's *Billy Budd, Sailor & Other Stories*<sup>11</sup> by Herman Melville, found in a local charity shop three days ago. The first story in the collection is called 'Bartleby'. Bobby has never read the story but is sure he saw a movie of the same name. He goes online to check – sure enough, it was made in 1970 and starred Paul Scofield. (And would you adam-and-evil it?...Bartleby was a scrivener, a 'copier'.) There's Daphne du Maurier's *Don't Look Now & Other Stories*<sup>12</sup> and Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*<sup>13</sup> – both stories were written in 1970 (1970, again??) but Bobby cannot believe that both women independently created stories with so many common features – did they know each other? Who started first? Did they both come across the basic idea in the work of some lesser writer? Maybe pure coincidence. Maybe. There's a printed copy of a MailOnline feature<sup>14</sup> from March revealing that 'the man who wrote the infamous 'dodgy dossier' for Tony Blair about Saddam Hussein's weapons is now a £100,000-a-year adviser working at the nerve centre of Barack Obama's military and foreign policy establishment.' Huh? Wasn't that dossier as cut and dried an example of plagiarism as it's possible to find? Whatever happened to the student whose work was nicked? Was he compensated? Did he ever receive the Phd he'd written the essay for? Given that the essay was identified thanks to the frequent grammatical errors, typos and spelling mistakes, did al-Marashi look on the bright side and view Alistair Campbell's ordering construction of the dossier as a free proofreading job? There's a copy of Kei Miller's *There Is an Anger That Moves*<sup>15</sup> – he left it in *The Ivory* pub in Glasgow after doing a reading there on April 6th. Ian Brotherhood will return it to Kei (his tutor) on Tuesday, after handing in the printed copies of this piece.

There's another print-out of an essay by Slavoj Zizek called 'The Desert of the Real'<sup>16</sup> – Bobby wanted to use the opening sentence:

'The ultimate American paranoiac fantasy is that of an individual living in a small idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he lives in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he lives in a real world, while all people around him are effectively actors and extras in a gigantic show.'

There's Andrew Keanie's essay about Coleridge<sup>17</sup>, where Norman Fruman's 1971 'Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel' is re-examined – Keanie neatly summarises Fruman's book thus:

'The central thesis of *The Damaged Archangel* is simple; Coleridge was an unusually dishonest writer who nevertheless persuaded people that the originality, rigour and significance of his works were beyond question...'

There's a Wikipedia article about Stewart Home – a British artist, writer, pamphleteer, cult movie maker and real honest-to-God, hand-on-heart unashamed plagiarist.

None of it, some of it, or all of it may find a place in the final piece.

But first things first – he needs a title.

Defenders of Lethem's 'Ecstasy of Influence' claim that the revelatory sub-title ('a Plagiarism') exonerates him from accusations of real plagiarism. Bobby thinks this is pure cant – it's plagiarism or it isn't, and Lethem's essay isn't plagiarism – It's collage.

Bobby is anxious that his own piece be free of trickery. Yes, he's constructed it with care, but there must be no codes, no hidden drawers, nudging or winking, no irony, satire or private jokes, but this 'naming' business becomes a problem. Lethem's 'joke' hinges on the title, on the absolution provided by the confessional subtitle.

Even with the use of his original title-making tool<sup>18</sup> Bobby is aware that he is producing words drawn from a list of his own making.

So he goes to the *Book of Changes - the I Ching*<sup>19</sup>. The random tossing of coins will determine at least one hexagram, but he'll repeat the process until a hexagram with 'moving lines' is shown, thereby allowing a second hexagram to be formed. The relevant chapter headings in the *I Ching* will supply the title of Bobby's essay. (Most *I Ching* chapters are headed by one-word abstract nouns: consideration, restoration, fear, dedication etc.)

And this is where the bond of trust between writer and reader is most keenly tested. Can the reader have faith that Bobby completed the process honestly? That he didn't just leaf through the *I Ching* looking for a combination of headings which might provide something snappy, witty, profound?

Bobby wonders if it will 'work'. This thing he's spent so much time on looks piecemeal, but he believes that he's tried to find some truth, that it may be discernible when the pieces are viewed as a whole by fresh eyes. It never was his intention to construct a personal attack against Jonathan Lethem. He doesn't know the man and doesn't care enough about him. But the hours spent pondering 'The Ecstasy of Influence' have forced him into new ways of thinking about the issues involved, and he is thankful for that. He *has* been influenced by Lethem's essay.

3.30pm, Sunday April 17th 2010: Bobby has just had a quick coffee and caught up with the news – in Krakow, the Polish president and his wife are about to be interred in an alabaster mausoleum constructed over the past few days. (They died in a plane crash along with 95 of Poland's VIPs.) Hundreds of thousands of travellers are stranded across Europe because the ash cloud blown from the erupting volcano in Iceland has grounded all flights for the past five days. In Ayrshire, the weather is fine, with a light breeze pushing bright cumulus South-East.

Bobby shakes the three coins in cupped hands and lets them drop onto the A4 lined pad which bears the handwritten question: essay title?

Two heads and a tail...  
Same again...  
Three heads...  
Three tails...  
Two tails and a head  
Two heads and a tail.

Good. There are moving lines, so he can construct a second hexagram.

The hexagrams are 39 and 45, therefore, the title of Bobby's essay will be...

#### Notes

1. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade*,

*A Duty-dance with Death*  
*A Fourth-generation German-American*  
*now living in easy circumstances*  
*on Cape Cod*  
*(and smoking too much),*  
*who, as an American infantry scout*  
*hors de combat,*  
*as a prisoner of war,*  
*witnessed the fire-bombing*  
*of Dresden, Germany,*  
*"The Florence of the Elbe,"*  
*a long time ago,*  
*and survived to tell the tale.*  
*This is a novel*  
*somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic*  
*manner of tales*  
*of the planet Tralfamadore,*  
*where the flying saucers*  
*come from.*  
*Peace.*

2. Bob Thompson, 'Writing Under The Influence', *Washington Post*, May 16th 2007.
3. Jonathan Swift, 'A Modest Proposal', 1729 – unable to trace original publication, but it was published anonymously.
4. George Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*, Penguin Books Ltd, 1957. 'Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool' was originally published by *Polemic* magazine (no. 7) in March 1947.
5. Herman Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game*, original German edition 1943 by Fretz & Wasmuth, Zurich, first English translation published in UK by Holt, Rinehart & Winston Inc, 1970.
6. Slavoj Zizek, 'The Desert of the Real', September 2001, available via multiple online sources.
7. The man (name untraceable) was a well-known busker in Glasgow city centre in the '80s and early '90s. His spray-painted Al Jolson 'tags' have given him international cult status amongst graffiti artists. Almost a quarter-century after he was at his most active, one of his 'menshies' can still be viewed – it is near Bell Street in Glasgow – an image and location details have been archived at [duncancumming.com](http://duncancumming.com)
8. George Orwell, *ibid*.
9. Norman Mailer, *Cannibals and Christians*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1967.
10. Hunter S. Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt (Gonzo Papers, Vol 1)*, Summit Books (Simon & Schuster), New York 1979.
11. Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor & Other Stories*, Penguin English Library 1967.
12. Daphne du Maurier, *Don't Look Now and Other Stories*, Victor Gollancz, 1971.
13. Muriel Spark, *The Driver's Seat*, Macmillan & Co, 1970.
14. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1256042/Dodgy-dossier-aide-100k-boss-White-House-lobbying-firm.html>
15. Kei Miller, *There Is an Anger that Moves*, Carcanet Press Ltd, Manchester, 2007.

16. Slavoj Zizek, *ibid*.

17. Andrew Keanie (University of Ulster), 'Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel', Oxford University Press 2006.

18. 'Bobby Doohihan's Essay Title Machine:' Any of the following may be paired within 'The \*of\*' template to provide essay titles.

tyranny texture essence flavour integrity  
manipulation anxiety ecstasy stealth pornography  
undergrowth failure mystery influence terrorism  
memory decency morality fury globalization  
monopoly discourse poverty wealth obscenity  
death victory fate surface relativity misery  
fear theft justification exclusion confusion  
chaos reality plagiarism guilt legalization  
code illustration constraint health reflexivity  
irreducibility suspension control duty

e.g.

'The Flavour of Fury' – retro-noir detective novels.

'The Stealth of Wealth' – a critique of Capitalism.

'The Wealth of Stealth' – a celebration of Due Caution.

'The Tyranny of Fate' – solace for those who feel doomed.

'The Fate of Tyranny' – Hitler, Hussein, Ceaucescu, etc.

'The Influence of Undergrowth' – examines problems preoccupying greenkeepers.

'The Undergrowth of Influence' – the psychology of subversive teachers/potential terrorists in mainstream education.

etc, etc...

(Bobby recommends that the table be printed in a large font size, concealed between sheets of newspaper, and a pin used to prick holes until two words are definitely pierced in one of their characters – with fifty words in the table, there are 2,352 possible permutations.)

19. Cheng Yi, *I Ching, The Tao of Organisation* (translated by Thomas Cleary) Shambhala Publications Inc, Boston USA, 1988; Richard Wilhelm/Cary F Baynes, *I Ching or book of changes*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1951; Judy Fox/Karen Hughes/John Tampion, *An Illuminated I Ching*, Neville Spearman Ltd, UK 1982