

THE  
ETHNOGRAPHER  
OR: NIXON IN  
CARACAS '58



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Version 1.00.2

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*“He interrogates all the heterogenous objects of which his treasury is composed[.]”*

*– Claude Lévi-Strauss*

He ran his finger under the seam of the seat and felt the place where the leather bunched unceremoniously. He picked at it, this wayward stitch in the back of the presidential limo. He wondered if it was in his power, within the ability of those in his command, to find out who had made the inexplicable error, as a purely intellectual exercise. If there was an inspector tag, this would almost certainly narrow down the factory, perhaps even the row of workers, to which the inspector was assigned. A human being, he knew, could be positively identified by the unique tics that show up in repeatable tasks. So surely the sewing of leather, as much as the human element could impose, would reveal tiny patterns and deviations, an approximate arm length inferred by the small jerk of the sewer at the end of their reach re-establishing themselves. If there were twins on the line, there would be other signs. And what would the president want with this person: A phone call? A summons to his office? A recusal? A tryst in the jungle?

The limo rolled over two pieces of a three-piece suit.

I don't know if I have the head for it anymore, that crystal blue gaze that allowed me to see clear to the bone. I have taken up in a home, my own, It has come to this: that there is only one brand of oatmeal I can stomach in the mornings. If the store is out, I go to another. This is how societies begin, when we trample the rules of common sense and begin redefining our world and the things in it. I am two steps away from nomadism, when you considered the generally accepted progression of nomadic societies, at least for those who became nomadic after a period of time being settled. Cowick defines these states in terms of agitation, which I don't believe is correct, but it is not my area of expertise and I do not have the heart to punch outside of my weight class anymore. The process begins, Cowick's mouth to god, with a mild agitation of scarcity, followed closely, in this chain of events, with fetishizing, followed by a great longing which, in the course of a single step, morphs to a worship and forms effigies, and finally, a prolonged search is undertaken. This is Searching, of his famous Fleeing/Searching/Wandering triptych, introduced in the *Journal*, followed on by *Modes of Nomadic Peoples*, and, by a mainstream press, slim, dense volumes in all caps, *FLEEING*, *SEARCHING*, and the heftier *WANDERING*. Wanderers always operate under a false flag, he would want me to remind you. There is truly no such thing, but you must take people and societies especially at face value, else communication will break down. In truth (and here I'm officially out of my comfort zone) Wanderers, proper, do not exist; intellectuals always need an exception that can be loaded with whatever they have to get off their chests, and in Cowick's case it was disillusion with how poorly societies defined themselves, having forgotten that which it only takes a stranger a few weeks to uncover. No, that was with me. Cowick's issue with the Wanderers was a more nuanced one, due in large part to the limitations of his own imagination.

*The Wanderers are silent, disinclined to throw off the anchor entirely, but reticent to confront their condition, to encounter either their flight or their search, whichever it is, to rationalize, to necessitize<sup>1</sup>. They tend to have no fixed religion, and this, in my mind, makes them dishonest.*

1. I hate this word, which Cowick claims to be the progenitor of. In an interview, "It strictly means to treat that which is not a necessity as a necessity. It is a form of secular fetishizing." He can toss that word like a grenade.

Oatmeal is a dinner food as easily as it is a breakfast food, most just lack the imagination. It can be made savory, as well as sweet.

*The Ethnographer*, produced during the summer of 1969, was a three-act play centered on then-vice president Richard M. Nixon's disastrous goodwill trip to Venezuela, during which his limousine was set on by scores of violent protestors on the streets of Caracas. The liberties taken include transferring Nixon to the more remote Apure region in the south, surrounded by stoic but threatening tribesmen, perhaps but not assuredly hitherto unknown to Western culture. At the beginning of the second act, an emergency call is placed on the limousine's phone to Claude Lévi-Strauss, who is to act as a special advisor to the president. Only Nixon is ever seen on stage.

"Goddamnit. Claude, they're gonna flog me!"

As an exercise let's say that the night of a pauper was spent toe-to-toe with a better armed ghost, a real disappearing act, more seedy and lascivious and twice as transparent under bright light. Let's say the withdrawals from such a confrontation leave lasting ripples that compound during the day, in collaboration with a genetic predisposition for endless worry and autophagy. That it leaves his lower lip quivering, constantly. Let's say that the floundering of this pauper, an almost literal writhing, the writhing on the wall, causes seizures and resignation among staff, the dismissal of a late shift manager, and a practical dilemma with respect to food stuffs. This leaves him willing to go out against the murmuring dark, belly agrowl, following the path uphill, spared some demons as a result. Let's say he works his way out and then home, and he's not followed in. Does he have refuge? Does he have the patience to experience refuge? Or does the hunger keep him?

I am telling the story.

What Cowick said about the Wanderers, after that first bit of drivel that was only for god's sake in the preface, was that—and I'm laying his whole thesis out right now, because the man never had an idea or a thought that couldn't be summed up in a few words (though he threw every one he had at them)—that their only driving force was spectacle, that they were in love with their own silhouettes on the horizon This is the spectacle as public image.

I brush my teeth with baking soda for the same reason I eat oatmeal: because I like the taste.

It's entirely plausible that Nixon had a car phone in 1958. But that he could have used it in Caracas, let alone Apure, to call Paris is completely out of the question.

"There are *people* out there."

"Like hell they are!"

In 1982, the Pace Gallery exhibited a work by Alastair Welch titled *Tricky Dick Grows Claustrophobic in the Face of His Enemies (Caracas, 1958)*, which featured a plexiglass cube about 18"x18"x18" with a lump of fleshy latex filling it, utterly amorphous, but still somehow resembling the former president.

Service to the spectacle is utterly limiting. The chase for the fetishized icon, stretched out over generations, has a normalized arc not quite resembling a circle. This is perfect freedom, to deviate, to retrace. For those in flight, there is no choice to return, but every other direction is in play, the range of vectors lacks only one or two degrees. Certainly there are limiting factors, but not *limits* per se. Freedom does not always look like we expect.

The Wanderers tend to care more about architecture, about a *profile*.

I cannot let this get away from me. Solely on the level of the artifact am I against these definitions. I take extreme caution not to use them myself. We are all responsible for that which we help reproduce, even if we are helpless. I approached the manager of the grocery store nearest my home, the one who is, from time to time, entirely out of the oatmeal that I most prefer, and told him what I have told you, though I told him first, that I sometimes went several miles out of my way to another store when he was out of the oatmeal, and I bought much more than the oatmeal—much more, indeed—and this was all business he lost out on, and I tucked my tone to sound less threatening, and became amicable, telling him for how many years I had been coming to his store, finding the selection most satisfactory, never once getting a bad egg, and that the problem, and yes I called it that, had only developed once I myself had developed this affinity—in older age, one's tastes actually solidify, *actually*, those neural patterns become stuck. I suggested we work out an arrangement, sign a contract if necessary, that he would order more

of the oatmeal than he had recently, and I would agree, promise to do my shopping there, because, as I had already told him, I stopped there regularly anyhow before going on to the further stores. (Yes, it had sometimes been more than the one.) I don't remember well how the rest of the exchange went, only when Nixon exclaimed at the end of Act 2: "Christ, man!"

The laziness of *The Ethnographer* is that for large stretches, the off-stage Lévi-Strauss simply reads passages of the nascent *Savage Mind*, while Nixon responds in syntactic expletives. We, the audience, were supposed to get something out of the juxtaposition.

J.A. Neary, an obscure epistemic philosopher of the mid-twentieth century, believed that all art had a root in juxtaposition, a crude form of contradiction. This was a feat of logic, Neary pulled, because his thesis was on language and contradiction, how everything was a form of contradiction: the truism, the sentence type most often used in human language according to Neary, consisted of a built in contradiction, namely that while the statement appeared true and accounted for all parts of a state of affairs, it was nevertheless false or meaningless. This again, was a stretch, because the true nugget of his thesis, was that irony was a form of truism in which a contradiction was set like a trap; it's job was to fall apart, presenting a truth in the process. Everything else had to be explained as an extension of this function, thus truism was also a contradiction, if only categorically, and juxtaposition became a simple contradiction. "The first human mark on a cave wall was a simple juxtaposition of pigment on stone, a simple line made with curious intent." The contradiction, if I remember correctly, was inherent in man's acting out against his mortality. The argument held no water.

Neary's argument could be seen as a kind of truism, though it might be a stretch to say that it even really possessed the appearance of truth. The phrase he repeats when describing the structure of the truism is "all parts accounted for". Truisms proper are typically well balanced statements.

A favorite example of Neary's reads as: "The sleep of the innocent makes possible the innocence of sleep." The doubling and inversion of "sleep" and "innocent" make the statement balance, as in accounting (Neary's favored metaphor for linguistic analysis), and renders the operative portion of the statement virtually irrelevant. Nothing, of course, can be established of a truth value. To Neary, we only speak in truism or gibberish. The classes of truism account for everything. Couldn't this

technique of simple inversion create pure gibberish? There are, Neary would answer, further distinctions.

It's worth noting that truism plays a double-role in Neary's taxonomy. For the sake of clarity, he renamed, mid-chapter, the top-level Truism to Proposition.

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Statements { ----- {Proposition-----{Truism}
                                     {Gibberish} {Axiom}
                                               {Irony}
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But these categories are practically incestuous. Neary made it clear across clades that anything that at all appeared as sensical was to be considered a Truism, that Irony and Axiom were both Truism, as they accounted for everything (within a given state of affairs, or range of possible states) and had symmetry.

The limo drove over two pieces of a three-piece suit.

"It wasn't human flesh than landed in a rolling splatter on the windshield of the presidential limo, but that of an overripe grapefruit." From the short story "Nohow, the Problem of Mistakes" by Jon Gianvito.

In "The Grammar of Nomadism", Cowick lays out a case for Wanderers that he later revokes: "The aspect of occupation that seems untenable to the Wanderers is the class system of traumas that forms, congeals in fixed societies; more than this, the successes and ceremonies, the abnormal synonyms, a hierarchy of experience out of a narrow vocabulary." Nomads, it has been suggested by others, typically have a greater fixity to their languages; they pick up vocabulary, but seldom change syntax or drop conjugations for the sake of anyone else.

Nixon had his cooks busy preparing roasted chickens at all hours of the day, in case he should want some.

Once a person had faced their own mortality, there are no more limits, no sense of reasoned perspective.

— Every civilization tends to overestimate the objective orientation of its thought and this tendency is never absent. When we make the mistake of thinking that the Savage is governed solely by organic or economic needs, we forget that he levels the same reproach at us, and that to him his own desires for knowledge seems more balanced than ours[.]

The manager of the store thought me a Savage, and he turned himself into Lenin; how could I expect him, running a public service barely in the black, to begin catering to the needs of individuals.

All of literature has resigned itself to being written by a single author, someone most resembling Borges but with a feminine name. Paraphrased from an essay on Nixon and authorship by Malouard.

The anthropologist, indeed the ethnographer who has been, up until now, and certainly afterwards, the author of these words is exceedingly unwell. He has not, as a matter of fact, been to the store, any store, in two years. He believes with religious conviction that he will be receiving his own call from the President, perhaps even Nixon himself, and he is preparing. He is fending off his rivals as he goes; he must go it alone. If he can, he will shed himself. He is embarrassed of all he has accumulated, but worries what lay under his shell of debris, a naked hermit crab or nothing at all. He is unwell. Forces have already begun to work on his eyesight. It very well may be a reversible kind of cataract, but he mistakes it for punishment. There is a chain of structures which target him. He is embedded within something messy, something with a messy significance that haunts his reflections on his own power. He thinks the world naively cranky. Can it really be like that? He thinks about the smallest unit of meaning, and decides that in no way can bricolage be considered literature. (This will become important.) Our belief in gods does not wane even as they are explained away; this, he says, explains it. We will believe in the power of a single word as literature before we can let it die, not to be replaced. There is still some value in original meaning, he thinks. The Wanderer, Cowick reminds us, calls god what he settles on for the moment; he lacks sincerity.

I've become embedded in my messy prose.

The thread is not so simple as oatmeal. In an occupation you project onto whatever surface, however mealy, you can find. You cater to strange whims, and go out of your way to be insensible. This would put



me in the very early stages of Fleeing. The sense that you can no longer stay here, the gradual dissolution to your notion of private property, which begins and ends with your own ideas. Intellectual property is likely the first pillar to go; that will be the radical death of the author. Where it concerns me, I have a car that I take everywhere; I have practical concerns, dietary habits notwithstanding. But I could not be stopped, if I set out. But what if I were accosted like Nixon? This is what I mean by practical concerns.

We want our characters to have specific manias, rather than generalized fears and theories.

I have tried prose on occasion, written sex scenes and sent them to college friends and asked them, Is this how it was? In all forms of nomadism, memory is collective. That is the only way to be sure that anything at all has happened.

The horizon plays heavily in each of Cowick's three works, each of which depends on small but important differences in linear perspective. Searchers see in the vanishing point of the horizon a reflection of themselves. Those in Flight see themselves as a reflection of the vanishing point.

This was not, per se, in each of Cowick's works, but can be easily implied. After reading Hito Steyerl's essay, "In Free fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective", it became quite apparent to me. "Linear perspective creates the illusion of a quasi-natural view to the 'outside', as if the image plane was a window opening into the 'real' world. This is also the literal meaning of the Latin *perspectiva*: to see through."

I am not above fighting and scrapping, if that is what is required, but I made an effort, have made an effort to avoid seeing that store manager again. Flight is the more obvious answer at times; it is not a verb, but an adjective of one who is far away through intent, willed there, recreated elsewhere. Through friends I encountered in exile, I found myself in separate political circles, and as much as I would have liked to hop in my old sedan and take extended holidays in faraway aisles, I had to stay put, put till now, jotting and waiting. There is still feeling in my legs, for the time of day. I trust my senses that I am not in any kind of free fall. In that last statement, attached to myself as subject, are the ground and

not, the ground implied by *not* with respect to *free fall*. I'd go so far as to say the entirety of gravity is contained in that statement. Does this make it an Axiom or a Truism?

"We saw Nixon from too many angles to go back to politics as we knew it. It was the death of the image."

Having read the likes of Sturtevant and Frake, I still have unanswered questions on the floral and faunal classification systems used by *true* nomads. I am not certain whether or not it is true that they generally have fewer classifications for proper species, but if it is, I have an idea as to why that is. It is purely a matter of economy. They have no need for words for individual species of ants, of which they will encounter thousands, more. It would over-tax them. Instead, they need only words for Ants That Kill, Ants That Sting, Ants That Burn, Ants That Attack, Ants That Scavenge, and so on. This helps them keep broad, imprecise categories that are nonetheless the most useful to them. Mischaracterizations are common, however, and occasionally deadly. But it is thought that taxonomic errors are treated with an equal severity across cultures. It is this severity that drives me to farther and farther stores for the kind of oatmeal that I prefer. It both the specific brand, and the only member of a broader category which is only unintentionally exclusive, Oatmeal That Pleases Me.

I've made it sound like I'm awaiting instructions from a sinister cabal. That is not at all the case. Let me elaborate: It has become a personal belief system of mine that at any time, I will receive an urgent call from the President—Nixon, most commonly in my imagination—who is in peril, his limousine surrounded by Savages, and my assistance will be crucial in getting him out alive, even though I only have my baser opinions to offer him. All of this is, in fact, a rehearsal. Everything I've told you I intend to tell him. This is not a matter of religion but of meditation. I do not believe any of it for a second, but Nixon trapped in his limo in Caracas, Venezuela in 1958 is the vanishing point in which I see myself reflected. Only refracted from it can I exist.

His work toward a revelation will go unfulfilled. Nixon, from inside of the limo, slowly lost his sense of the horizon.

Another work titled "Nixon in Caracas '58" by the sculptor Mark James Forney features a taxidermied viper surrounded by likewise preserved mice, teeth sharpened and bared. There are visible lumps in what would

be the snake's abdomen. It was exhibited once in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1972.

Does the world need another document of paranoia? It is not without guilt that I allow him to go on, in disorganized expression, heading clear for a rupture. I do it because—and I can't stress enough the divergence of our beliefs—Nixon would want him to take the call.

"But linear perspective also performs an ambivalent operation concerning the viewer. As the whole paradigm converges in one of the viewer's eyes, the viewer becomes central to the worldview established by it. The viewer is mirrored in the vanishing point, and thus constructed by it."

We simply don't form philosophies that require personal change.

In *Political Thought as Magical Thought*, Jacob Killorn makes a case clear from the title of the monograph. (Killorn was among the second wave of Structuralists, and held tight on to Lévi-Strauss's skepticism of totemism long after it was fashionable.) Killorn was not interested in political theory, but rather with political thought among low-income households. He alleges to have gone in with no preconceived ideas about what he might find, but noticed immediately, according to his preface, that political thought in contemporary America looked almost identical to "magical thinking" among tribal cultures he had studied previously in Colombia and Nicaragua. In magical thought, everything is linked through a carefully structured determinism, with strands running among people, animals, objects, events, and eventually all back to fetishized individuals and abstracts. (The abstracts make up something of the substance, the physics of the strands, while the individuals know both how to read their movements and, in most cases, cause them.) Party ideology plays both the role of deity and religious framework, establishing the universal causes to be recognized in everyday events. The boy drowned in the otherwise peaceful lake because of witchcraft. The forest burned due to over-regulation of industry. Bogeymen are inherent to either system, because they are one in the same. Killorn stretches his thesis nearly 400 pages, making a convincing argument that there is no real hope in rescuing political thought (and economic thought, though there is another book in that topic for him later on), that it cannot be raised to the level of scientific thought, and that the argument that it should be is utterly offensive. As Lévi-Strauss pointed out in *The Savage Mind*, as recited to President

Nixon in the back of his limousine, "Magical thought is not to be regarded as a beginning, a rudiment, a sketch, a part of a whole which has not yet materialized. It forms a well-articular system, and is in this respect independent of that other system which constitutes science[.] It is therefore better, instead of contrasting magic and science, to compare them as two parallel modes of acquiring knowledge." To which Nixon responded, "I can't make heads or tails of these tits!" [sic].

There is a rumor that the House Assassinations Committee is still active, and that they have lunch on Thursdays. There is a competing rumor that a group of representatives that meets for lunch on Thursdays has been nicknamed the *House Assassinations Committee*.

*While several works in the last five years have taken Nixon to task, ending is his visible flaying (Journey South) or being taunted in the nude while women prepare a vat of boiling oil (Finding Love in Guatopo), The Ethnographer is keen on slapstick, made all the more banal by lazy writing. (Yes, some of us have read the book, and the thrill of recognition wears off after page two.) I can find no other motive but satire for this work of ham-hocked theater, and in the end I came out pitying old Tricky Dick. I can only assume this is against the wishes of the author, because what a peculiar and interesting work it might have been had pity been the stated goal, what a marvelous guide it might have made, if only it hadn't been written as two hours of a scantily jowled Nixon bleating obscenities into an imaginary phone. "What's this horseshit all about?" We couldn't agree more, sir.*

No, there's more to life than oatmeal and secret trysts in the jungle, than the sense of bewilderment at life's boundaries that in so many cultures has been mistaken for religion. I could never be trusted to paint my own portrait, tuning my features to end up far afield of the drowsy, somewhat ovine appearance I project. So I paint a charity to myself! There's nothing good on television, but *Dateline* helps me sleep with its grave pacing. A story can't survive so many commercial breaks. Every single one of them has a list of side effects, for purposes of information or litigation, proving iatrogenesis is alive and well. If only the drug companies knew it was the commercials that made us sick. Which sounds like the raw materials for a conspiracy, but it's really nothing but Baudrillard and jaundice. What would I say if Nixon called now? Let them take you, or they'll come for us; that's the way it has to be. He'll refuse, and I'll hang up, and they'll trace the call even if they kill him, curious who works for him. If they sent a spy to this hovel they'd let me

alone. It's not so bad as that. I know some in my position who settle for four walls ringed with bookshelves, one of them lower than the others to hold a hot plate and a dented cooler. Where the devil do they go to the bathroom? That will always haunt me. Cowick bought a piece of land and built a yurt on it, dug a pit in the back; at least that answers some questions. He never moved the damned thing, not once. A woman visited from time to time, I'd have to imagine. My life could be no worse or better.

Nixon is somehow shown pacing in the back of his limo.

Can't watch television, but can sit at the mall for hours. It's been two decades since the mall was at the height of its powers; now, one can feel a little sadness for it. It, too, can be forgotten. The space of the mall transitions between specific and casual relations, morphing in surroundings both ephemeral and eternal. Economic decay creates chaos among the configurations of stores, and the crowds attached to them, or to none at all. There is no moral superiority, not in architecture or commerce; a kids' clothing store had hopscotched locations, making it nearly to the train ride at the center of the mall before it shuts down after a little girl gets dragged halfway to Macy's, a prime example of Kunstler's reproach of Jackson, that "he was not interested in consequences, only manifestations." Well, he got it in that damned train. It's a slow train, I should add, and the girl was not badly injured, lest you think this is a book of solely morbid tales. Consequences don't have to be lethal to be consequences, and all endings create new beginnings, even in the hollowed out carcass of a whale. This dramatic way of talking about public architecture and its curative/corrosive powers ignores that substance which architecture has no name for, but which can be signified as content. I visited a doctor's office designed by Gropius once, and was still sick afterwards, for at least a week.

Killorn was once accused of founding a career on twenty pages of Lévi-Strauss.

In an article titled, "The Poverty of the Image", Neary writes that, "There is no such thing as an image of tiger. An image of a tiger can be either of a specific tiger or no tiger at all. In images, there are no representative images; you cannot give something the broad characteristics of a tiger and say it is a tiger because such a tiger has never existed. Or it does represent a specific tiger and by default excludes all others." This was something of a straw man.

The armored limo rolled over two pieces of a three-piece suit.

The song "Venezuela", one of the earliest in the canon of New American Folk (loosely defined as folk music after Woodie Guthrie) contained the quaint couplet:

*Well I heard you met our boy Nixon  
And you tried mighty hard to fix 'em*

The rest is too cutesy.

At the first performance of *The Ethnographer*, the audience was invited, throughout the play, to stomp their feet and yell whatever they knew in Spanish, to simulate the mob atmosphere. A fight broke out, and no one could hear the actors. The fight and spectatorial tendrils spilled outside, and someone was mugged in the commotion, quite possibly by another member of the audience.

"I was careful not to judge those among us who used the chaos to improve their positions."

I imagine one day that the head of human resources for a sprawling retail empire called me to ask after a reference for the manager of the grocery store that I had spoken with at length about the oatmeal, whose store I had never been back to. It was no mistake, the head of human resources, Paul, assured me; he considered me a character reference of the highest regard. Politics resides between spite and ambition, it is important to remember that. Had I been set up to fail him? Perhaps a high-powered uncle had gotten him the interview as a favor to his mother, to whom he owed a debt of gratitude for some small gesture of kindness earlier in their lives that he believed to have been, in retrospect, indispensable, utterly consequential in his life. Perhaps receiving such an interview, and with a few carefully worded phone calls, being offered the job—well, not *the* job, but a job, especially created for a man of his limited talents—he had offered me as a reference, certain my slander of him would make it impossible, regrettably so, for the company to hire him. Taking a moment to announce my professional credentials, explaining why I, of all the people he might have chosen, would be most adept at recognizing and categorizing his essential qualities, I thought that I was midway between person and persona at all times, and that

those who ventured to either extreme were somewhat inhuman. He's a right cock-weasel, I said, and asked that I not be bothered again, as I was expecting an important call. I hung up. Though the episode was entirely fictitious, I felt a pang of regret: I had made up cock-weasel on the spot, hyphen and all, but I couldn't help but think that in the confusion it inspired, it might be taken out of context as the homophobic ranting of a proper old coot who could and should not be considered anything of an expert on the more decent qualities of middle managers. In fact, I might have gotten him the job, inadvertently, sensitive as these things are, and he would, I feared, never forgive me.

It is possible that we see ourselves vanishing against the backdrop of history.

The political thinker possesses already all of the structures she will need to interpret any events, however esoteric, that follow.

Imagine that, Nixon stripped and shriveled, tied to a tree while the native girls titter at him and point, the men stand around with arms crossed looking pleased, the oil slowly starts to roil, but it will be an hour still.

Why have so many works of art ... found it necessary to turn the Venezuelans into savages, to remove them of their linens, their proper Spanish? Why has the role not been reversed?

All told it was a few hours of time.

From the front row, you could see the tiny worm-vein struggling for stature.

The text is still slithering: I spend all of my time constructing a miniature, because Lévi-Strauss points out that the miniature allows us to see the whole of the thing, to stop, for a moment, deconstructing it, viewing it in terms of *parts*. At life-size, we can only take apart and put back together as a mode of understanding; the miniature allows for contemplating of the thing. The return of the object has been a valiant one. (Insert Harman). Things, tied up in signs and concepts, allow for infinite recursion, everything nested in itself. How much of our life's experience is contingent on having access to the proper metaphors!

Nixon was a man in search of a metaphor; he utterly lacked structure. A poverty of metaphors can lead to life taking you by surprise, to a sudden and persistent confusion. There is an entire school of psychoanalysis bent on curing the insane by way of discovering and repairing defective metaphors, or providing one where there had been none. So simply an explanation for madness; the lack or sudden disappearance of a metaphor to frame our experiences. Where is Neary's accounting for metaphor in his system of propositions? Within Truism, somewhere, I'm sure; all parts accounted for. Is the miniature some type of metaphor? A truism? It is complete, yet it is not the thing itself. It cannot reveal *facts* about the thing itself, but it can provide a mode of thinking that often leads to a better understanding. Yes, the miniature is a metaphor.

The Wanderers, as Cowick would have it, are less prone to magical thought; they have traditional forms of medicine, but do not tend to draw conclusions based on type and similarity, in any of the cases studied (Regher and Quint). Their politics are likewise lacking in isomorphism

*We heard that you met our boy Dick  
And you played on him an awful trick*

I've found the passage in Neary: Metaphorical thought sits midway between irony and truism, but is, for taxonomical purposes, to be considered fully in the tree of the Truism, by the principle of first impact. A metaphor, or metaphorical proposition, does not carry new information, yet it can shift our understanding, reframe it. Like the truism, it can be tested against axiomatic statements for validity, but it cannot be hypothesized from and verified in a scientific setting. If it is pleasing, if it is useful, we will carry it with us until such time as it are not. The problem with the metaphor is that the properties of the metaphor are often transferred into axiomatic statements, a phenomenon Neary called axiomatic burrowing. *The fish floats in water as the balloon in the air*. From this, the fish become helium-filled, permanently rising until the pressure destroys them. This is what I mean.

There is something to be said for him.

Struggling for stature.



The fight that broke out in the audience during the first performance of *The Ethnographer* was due, according to several eye-witnesses, to one theatergoer's particularly vile epithet, hurled in at the stage in Spanish.

Nixon trapped in his limo is a perfect object of contemplation. Inside the armored walls, he can only be what he is; he is divorced from history even as history tries to consume him. He is nervous, not yet pudgy, as we come to know him later. He paces as best he can. He sweats. He curses. He shrivels. Oh, the actors can never wear his clothes as well, can never furrow and pant, can never channel his semi-potent rage. He understands perfectly his fate. This is what they miss. They paint him as naïve, chortling at Claude, missing every other word in a pre-uterine stupor. He was always elegant, half-bright, powerful. Afraid of death, certainly. Capable only through the metaphor of the presidency, even before he attained the office. Nixon wasn't so naïve as to think the people of Appalachia were any more *his* people. The Venezolanos were no different. Just something in the moment caught him by surprise, an unexpected flat; I'll tell you when the model is done.

Wondering aloud if Nixon, during those few hours, once had to use the bathroom. If he had a choice.

It was remarkably bright, that moment of recovering the dread of death, each strike a cartoon burst-bubble of light. His heart pounded out the trivial actions, he measured with his hands how far till the behemoth's beard, and this was where Father, the great power, would be tilling unforeseen crops, and he would get his leg caught in the tractor, get torn up and down, have to wear a colostomy bag, and then death turned inside out, inviting, became a synthesis rather than a rupture, but by god, it still scared him, sent shit running down his leg the moment it crossed his mind, which was often, too often, less often than some, but too often did death cross his mind, and he became afraid of union for what it represented, ill-equipped as he is at being *together*, the stains for added shame, signs of his fear, signs that his mind would not rest, the modern citizen, the old brooder, the young centenarian, anxiety pulling at him, pinching his skin, sometimes clean off, throughout the day; we don't speak of night. He has lost control of the story, something's burning, bony elbows grinding nervously into his desk, raising smoke, on his trail to terminus, physically cramping when he closes his eyes under the strain of his own temporary reality, night shook him off, evenings of posterity, night shook him off, bilging after another in point-blankness, ever the watchful husband with cysts forming in his eyes and under his skin, the fear of nothing, the fear of seeing less than

there is to see, how he imagines the works of the great masters to look now, even at arm's length, thinking he would be less afraid in the dark, but he is moreso; night shook him off; he has lost control of the story.

Cowick says the Wanderers do not fear the sight of their own footsteps, which is a petty truism and a poor attempt at poetry.

The Wanderers are gibberish; they hold no information. They fall apart into nothing. But they are not easily manipulated, let it be said.

It is impossible without specialized tools to pierce the dura membrane without causing sufficient damage. I half suspected a little Dick running around the walls.

*The language is butchered at every turn, the characters unreasonable facsimiles of unreasonable people, let alone those they are trying to represent.*

All structures can be counted as Truism, even and especially those encountered in magical, religious, and folk thinking. All things accounted for.

I am through with the model-making. My hands were ineffective. I gained terrible little insight during the process, least of all into my own condition. I would instead like to build a scale model of the limousine itself in order to thrash it about.

He has never left home, not for supplies, not for food. Not in months, years.

In the short story "Sarcophagus" by Andres Baeza, we're shown a funeral for the then-vice president, buried inside of his limo, heads of state

surrounding him on all sides. Checkers scratching at the door. There is no apparent damage to the limo in the story, no indication of foul play, but the sermon, even in the translated version, remains in Spanish. *El perro está cansado. Listo?*

It is possible for one to see oneself in history, to see history as the only legitimizing force for one's being.

Struggling for stature.

Back at the service of the story, there are dense cobwebs hampering my ability to recall any longer how I can be situated here in history, a complication of my status as the lame Wanderer, sending them missives about the static life on light, troubled sleep. I won't risk blathering into abstraction. The core of the message is that there is no difference between our seemingly incompatible lifestyles; they are sufficient because we do not desire more. I do not desire to be profiled walking against the setting sun any more than they wish to be stagnant on my couch casting a flickering silhouette; without the judges of history present, both are equally agreeable. There are also no popular representations of our lives, no representations, as Baudrillard would put it, from which we cannot escape. We have opted out. My profession demanded another perspective. It would be more interesting, were I a spy on a train from Paris to Rome, explaining my position to you; this is your mistake, the kind of expectations you have allowed yourself to accrue. Literature is read by far more than those who are capable of living it. It is written, conversely, by fewer still. Discharge all the right-thinking and admired, whining faults and theses, or else we take the subject too gingerly, massage it unevenly, leave it de-veined and unappetizing. He is me and I am him. Isn't that always the way of it? The simple subject is dead. I have a wandering mind and a heart condition. My predilections are mine alone, as if I'd been a scholar always, mired in an even-handed emotional support of the humanities from which I sprang (biology is guilty of overreach, in this case). God may exist without religion, what of me without the academy? What of it without me? That from here, to everything, it's an appropriate response, to anathematize the world.

The playwright Mark G. Ingels died in 1974 at the age of 29. *The Ethnographer* was his first and only major production, seeing a two-month run on the back of a friendly review that likened it to "a complete reversal of *The Wrong Way Light Bulb*", a not entirely disingenuous sentiment. He left behind notes to a sequel, allegedly following Nixon's

election in 1968 as he battled flashbacks to the limousine, the end getting all hacky and preachy.

{The latest neuroscience confirms the illusion of the self, delusion of you continue to insist on a responsible agent at the sentence level. Words are already pre-laden with ideologous connotations even without assigning agency, are already bogged down by historical currents and the vanity of perverts. Now, there is some truth in phonemes, meaningless, pre-ideological artifacts. Words are complex, sentences and paragraphs are downright fragile. The phoneme is the stone tool, a blunt object, but it's simplicity goes a long way toward undermining its value. To create a fundamental unit of useful qualities and symmetries is perhaps the most difficult task of all; after the wheel, all else became simple.}

The limousine rolls over two pieces of a three-piece suit.

"The language is embarrassing, unrealistic," he wrote, "because it must ring absolutely hollow. You must never allow yourself to be sucked in, to believe you're watching a stage-play about politics rather than the real thing, some sadistically staged ritual. We must remain unpleasantly alert at all times." {[I failed him in spite of his protest.], [He was failed in spite of his protest, perhaps by Cowick, by Neary, or by me.]}

In the whole of linguistic devices, Neary writes, the chiasmus is as much the idealized form of the Truism as, say,  $E=MC^2$  is the model axiomatic statement. "The sleep of the innocent makes possible the innocence of sleep."

The last film Ingels is reported to have seen was *Blazing Saddles*.

In "Aftermath (Nixon in Caracas '58)", part of the Servilla Pavilion, an overturned limo sat smoldering in a ditch carved into a historic park near Tours.

"Somebody threw a dead dog after him down the ravine."

Neary, in one his more cogent later works, identified a condition of the insane known as Dead Rhetoric, a sudden and traumatic loss of the

powers of recursion in language; old phrases and words and anecdotes are repeated, often in similar order. Sufferers will engage in conversations only to begin a script which is quickly revealed to be fraught with non-sequitur, the responses of the engaged party at best prompting tangents, but it is typically perceived that they are not registered at all. The ravings of the insane, it is said by Neary, could represent a "desperate and courageous effort" to combat this disorder and form new patterns of speech.

By the summer of 1973, Mark Ingels had come back from Vietnam. By February 12, 1974, he had been back almost eight months.

*"... the characters spend ninety minutes talking past one another..."*

It has occurred to me that I am without trauma still, and this is confusing, how an ending can be so close without trauma, though to have such a life may, in senescent reflection, be only that which we all deserve.

My trauma might be all bound up with Nixon's. That's one explanation.

In the immersive theater work, *A Soldier Set a Small Fire*, the titular soldier, dressed in otherwise generic fatigues, at one point is scripted to call out, "And send Nixon my lacquered head", though the work never advanced so far.

Cowick never goes so far as to call those who he has termed Wanderers what they might have otherwise been called, exhibitionists.

Ingels, too, read Cowick, read Neary.

Venezuela was, under the dictator Jimenez, the ninth country in the world to have television.

To gain television?

I went back to the store the other day to find them well-stocked of my oatmeal, and held up my end of the bargain by purchasing most, along

with other necessities. I would have to, later, move money between accounts, but that is no trauma. I'm waiting, as are you, for a collapse of some kind. Does it appear, as I now believe, that I am repressing some tragic history, and that I am inviting trauma as a curative? It would not be unheard of. Those who live with compulsive guilt often wish for some national tragedy, worldwide even, that would absolve them of their transgressions through pure force of history. How is it, then, that those who start wars recover?

- "In the case of games the symmetry is therefore preordained and it is of a structure kind since it follows from the principle that the rules are the same for both sides."
- "Fuck me, Sally!"

(It may have been "silly", as we only have transcriptions to go by.)

What a more fertile imagination could have done with that conversation.

The year we grew sufficient, I disembarked, heading for the wee small paradise which she afforded me, reluctantly repentant and all that was expected of me, but a hundred days later I had baked in all that I needed and maintained only a human shell and basic intellectual properties. I was as entrenched as the House Assassinations Committee, exceedingly stifling, lifted only by a lever with a pearl handle, after a manner of speaking. I escaped with my life/wife, and for a while I was pleased with this new equilibrium, with fewer moving parts and the candidates for catastrophic failure visibly reduced. And of course the solitude, slowly decomposing, becoming no less a solid mass, but obscuring the individual minutes. I wrote a story—uncharacteristic of me—about a man who had worked only a month at Los Alamos, but the guilt of that association drove him to accept, finally, all of the fault of the second World War. He might have made all of history had I not killed him off. We're all at fault, is what I was trying to say. Complicit. We paint ourselves grisaille and cope with the undertones. We wish above all else to be singular. This is going nowhere.

The object alone is not the fault of its ontology, wrote Neary.  
Putz.

Ingels attended the New School for three semesters, from 1969-1970.

The Wanderers, wrote Cowick, found that a transient identity suited them better than a fixed one, that settling down might, in the end, mean they would have to become what they already knew themselves to be, and that this was an impossible choice, and this kept them going. He was fixed on their vanity. He offered no historical examples, no case studies, and eventually, begrudgingly, left the department.

The seated capacity for *The Ethnographer* would have been fewer than one hundred for all shows.

Who made Ingels write this dreck? It was not Neary, not I, not Cowick.

- Merely by contemplating it he is, as it were, put in possession of other possible forms of the same work, and in a confused way, he feels himself to be their creator with more right than the creator himself because the latter abandoned them in excluding them from his creation.
- Oh, I see.

It's not even a question. I was, after all, at Columbia at the time, pushing papers alongside the other heroes of the day (I even wrote a genuine defense of Neary's truism, titled, "Language and Accounting", which can now be purchased for a fortune through most university libraries).

Neary was eventually disgraced by a mail-order scandal.

"In the midst of self-importance..."

Nixon himself told Haldeman to "monkey wrench" the peace talks with Vietnam. Six years later, he was on his way out, and Ingels was dead. And I still have no trauma. I have been diligent in minor skirmishes, protecting the soft flesh and throwing the mealy bits to the scavengers, while around them swarm minor deities of no uncertain motive. Who can go the longest without a concrete noun? Certainly, I never tried.

"What is the virtue of reduction either of scale or in the number of properties?"

He's lost his thread and his gusto, tired as he is. I'm only filling in. If the call comes I'll take it; I can banter a while so he can clean the shit off of himself. Did I mention that? I shouldn't have. But he'll be alright. He'll pull himself together. He'll stop lamenting ghosts and read the dialogue instead, exquisite as it is, spoken as written, and he'll be delighted, utterly delighted. One step, two step, bones in the right place, the right alignment, but feeling as if his flesh will give way any moment, that he's a right unsteady container prone to spilling out all over the place. And he's no one to clean him up anymore. Isn't that the shame of this whole thing? Shame is the right word.





Joshua Rothes is the author of his life, only barely. His debut collection of short texts, *An Unspecific Dog*, is out now via punctum books/Dead Letter Office.

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