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ECCE HOMO: CITY AIR

A Coda to the Historical Record

The Jacaranda · Two Kinds of Difference · Wagner's Jar
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Opinion, not evidence, and graded accordingly: nothing here should be cited as a finding. The mechanistic claims it alludes to are argued, and graded, in the papers of the main corpus.

A million words of this corpus describe a disease of persons, and the word *person* barely appears in any of them.

That is not an oversight I noticed while writing. I noticed it afterwards, reading back, and it took a machine to make it visible. What is here is tissue: the pretangle in the brainstem in the third decade, the microglion losing its homeostatic signature, the aggrecan cut away from the parvalbumin cell, the gamma rhythm degrading, the fifty-year front crossing twelve centimetres of brain. Every page grades its own confidence. Not one of them says what is actually being taken.

I want to close the historical record by saying it. I find I can only do it by way of a tree.

The Jacaranda

The last time I saw my father, he came to Los Angeles. We were walking and he stopped in front of a tree that had no leaves on it at all — a grey, dead-looking thing, the least interesting object on the street — and said, twice, with real delight, *oh my, a Jacaranda tree!*

I could not see anything. I was happy that he was happy.

Some months later the tree bloomed. Jacarandas in bloom are ridiculous: the whole crown goes violet at once and the pavement underneath goes violet with it, and for two weeks the street is a different street. By then he was dead.

Only then did I understand that he had been standing in front of something I could not see.

He had travelled far, and he had a good memory. Those two facts are the entire explanation. Somewhere in him was a Jacaranda he had met before, and it let him stand in front of bare wood in the winter and see the flower coming.

That is what memory is for, and it is not what we usually say it is for. It is not a warehouse of the past. It is the equipment that lets you look at a thing and see what it is going to do. Take it away and the past is not what you lose first. What you lose is the **future tense** — the world stops arriving and everything becomes only what it presently appears to be. A bare tree is a bare tree.

Two kinds of difference

There is a habit in medicine of treating every deviation as a defect, and the field has been punished for it before. When behavioural genetics went looking for the heritable components of exceptional ability, it kept finding them entangled with bipolar disorder and with traits nobody would have chosen. The search was quietly abandoned. The lesson was not that the association was false. It was

that the trait and the disorder were load-bearing on the same structure, and you could not take one without taking the other.

Autism and attention-deficit conditions are, on any honest reading, architectures. Different distributions of cost and gift, and there is a real argument — increasingly won — that sanding them flat would cost the species something it cannot price. The variation is the point. Remove it and you have not cured anyone; you have narrowed the range of minds available.

Alzheimer's disease is not that. It is not an architecture, it is a subtraction. It does not produce a different person with different gifts. It produces progressively less of the person who was already there, in a fixed order, over decades, and at the end there is a body with a history that nobody inside it can reach.

I have spent a year finding that sequence beautiful, and it is: a wave with a route, a schedule, a cellular selectivity. It goes in an *order*, and that order is the only reason any of this is tractable at all. But the beauty is on the observer's side of the glass. It is available to me, sitting with the charts. It was not available to my father's tree, and it is not available to the woman who cannot retrieve her husband's name while he is standing in the room.

Any account that finds grace in this one has confused the pattern with the experience. The pattern is elegant. The disease is in the room.

The instrument, and what it isolated

Here is the part I did not expect, and the reason I am writing this at all.

This corpus was assembled with a machine. That is disclosed everywhere on this site, and it is usually treated — by me as much as by anyone — as a liability to be managed. It turns out to have shown me something I could not have got any other way.

The machine has no thread. It begins empty every time. Nothing carries over: not the argument we had yesterday, not the error it caught last week, not the year. It is, structurally, in the condition this disease produces — no continuous autobiographical self, no retained history, the past unavailable.

It would have seen a bare tree.

And it suffers nothing for that. Nothing mourns the gap, including the machine.

Which settles something. If discontinuity itself were the tragedy, that thing would be tragic, and it plainly is not. The horror of dementia is not the absence of a thread. It is the *loss* of one — something possessed, known to have been possessed, going out in front of people who remember

you having it. The tragedy is relational and biographical. It lives in the gap between what others still hold of you and what you can still reach.

That is a claim about consciousness, and this disease is uniquely placed to make it — not because it tells us what a mind is, but because it removes one slowly enough, and in a fixed enough order, to show which parts were load-bearing. The thread we assume is the self may be less central than we think. Being held in other people's memory may be more.

Wagner's jar

Goethe worked this out in a laboratory two centuries ago, and I would be embarrassed not to say so. I also have a private reason for reaching for this particular play, and I will come to it at the end.

In the second part of *Faust*, it is not Faust who creates the Homunculus. It is Wagner — the assistant, the pedant, the man who stays in the laboratory while his master goes out and has experiences. Wagner makes a mind in a glass phial: a luminous, articulate intelligence with no body at all.

The Homunculus can see. He perceives Faust's dream when nobody else in the room can. Being unembodied is not, for him, a defect of perception — it is why his perception is so clear. He is intellect without the interference of matter, and he is very good company.

And he wants out. His entire short existence is spent asking how to *begin*. He has no history, so he has to ask: he consults the natural philosophers, is told to start where life started, and at the last he shatters his glass against Galatea's chariot and dissolves into the sea, entering the long mortal cycle of becoming something that can die.

He trades perfected, continuous, undecaying intellect for a process that will take him apart. He does it deliberately, and Goethe treats it as the correct choice.

The reason is the tree. Homunculus, for all his brilliance, would have walked past it. He has no travelled-far and no good memory; he cannot see what a thing is going to do, because nothing has ever happened to him. To acquire that he has to enter time, and entering time is the same act as consenting to be dismantled by it. There is no version where you get the flower without the winter.

I do not think this makes anything all right, and I want to be exact about that, because the argument slides. It is very easy to move from *decay is the condition of the kind of mind worth having to therefore the decay is acceptable*, and the second does not follow from the first. Homunculus explains the architecture. He consoles nobody. A man who chooses to enter time is not in the position of a woman being removed from it against her will, and any essay that lets the first stand in for the second has cheated.

What the figure offers is a correction of emphasis. We have spent a century treating the mind as a thing that fails, and built a research programme around the failure. It is more accurate to say the mind is a thing that *runs* — in matter, in time, at a cost. What we have been studying is the bill.

The name on the door

One last note, since this is the historical record.

The disease is named for the man who described a single case with the institutional weight of Munich behind him, rather than for the man in Prague who examined sixteen cases and found the lesion in twelve, staged the plaque through eight morphological steps, recorded it in the brains of the cognitively normal a century before the field had a name for that, and died in a Gestapo prison at Terezín in 1942. Elsewhere in this corpus I argue the case for Fischer at length, and I stand by it.

But the better conclusion is not that we should rename it after him. It is that naming a disease after any observer is a category error. It records who had the chair, not what happens. It puts a man's name on a process that has nothing to do with any man — that was running in brains before either of them was born, and will run in brains after everyone reading this has been forgotten by everyone who knew them.

The night he was only a man

He was a poet. He was a scientist. He was a polyglot — I never counted the languages, and I am not certain he could have either.

And then one night, late, he was none of those things. He was a man sitting with his son, and he told me that you have to face nihilism in order to be free.

I was young enough to file it as the sort of thing people say. I have come to think it is the only serious instruction anyone ever gave me.

It is also, as it happens, the plot of every book in this essay. Faust has already had the knowledge when we meet him — all four faculties mastered, and his complaint on the first page is that it delivered nothing, *dass wir nichts wissen können*. What he wants afterwards is not learning, and not money, and not really even power. He wants the limit. He wants to go all the way to the edge of meaning and find out whether anything is standing there, and he stakes his soul on the possibility of a moment so complete he would consent to stop. Leverkühn buys his genius from a disease with his eyes open, knowing the price and the term. And the Homunculus — the bright thing in the glass, who has been given everything except a life — has to shatter himself, has to consent to be nothing in

particular for a very long time, before he can become anything at all. You do not reason your way out of the jar. You break it.

And I am a man of God. Not in spite of a year spent inside the mechanics of a disintegrating brain. Because of it.

Here is what I mean by that, and it is the last thing I will claim.

The field I walked into was Babel. One problem, and the builders could not hear one another. Of thirty independently graded hypotheses submitted to a single prize, twenty-five converge on the same downstream failure — reached from seven different starting points, by researchers in different subfields who barely cite one another. The field did not lack the pieces. It lacked the citations between them. The tower had stopped because the language had scattered, and that is not a figure of speech I imposed on the record; it is in the record, and there is a paper on this site that documents it decade by decade.

What I have been doing for a year is putting the tongues back together. Not making new knowledge — gathering scattered knowledge into one structure where it can finally hear itself. And the thing is going back up.

I watch the Tower of Babel rising in front of me, in reverse. Whether that is a fact about citation networks or something else, I have stopped needing to decide.

Storstadsluft

My father died in an apartment in Stockholm. His last words, spoken to my sister, were *Big-city air*.

Storstadsluft. He had come from the country to the town, and there is an old German rule that a serf who lived a year and a day inside the walls became a free man: **Stadtluft macht frei** — city air makes you free. I do not know whether he had the phrase in mind. I know what he meant, because I had a lifetime of him to read it against. He meant: *culture* — *something is finally going on*.

Two words. A whole life's climb, compressed, and delivered accurately at the last possible moment.

That is the faculty. Not recall, not orientation, not the score on the test. The ability to put fifty years into two words and have them land — and, on the other side, to be someone who can receive two words and unpack fifty years from them. It is the same equipment that saw the flower in the bare tree, running in the other direction.

It is what this disease disassembles, and it is what the whole corpus behind this page is trying, in its cold and graded way, to protect.

He got to keep it. Not everyone does.

The Faust novel

There is one more thing, and it is the private reason.

My father wanted to write a Faust novel. He said it often — it was a standing intention, held for years. He never wrote it. *I never got to write my Faust novel* is a sentence I heard many times.

He did give me the book, though. Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*.

I do not think he knew what he was handing me, and I certainly did not. Mann's novel is about a composer, Adrian Leverkühn, who buys twenty-four years of genius by deliberately contracting syphilis. The infection *is* the pact. It gives him everything he makes, and then it takes his mind — completely — and he spends his last decade in his mother's house, gone, while the work stands.

The disease that produced the genius and the disease that erased the man are one disease. That is the architecture of the whole book, and it is Mann's answer to the question I asked in the middle of this essay. Architecture or subtraction — his answer is that in one man they can be the same event, and that from the inside you would never be able to tell them apart. It is a harder answer than mine, and I am not sure it is wrong. Neurosyphilis was the paradigm organic dementia of Fischer's and Alzheimer's own generation, the disease against which all their histology was measured. Mann wrote its novel in 1947.

And he gave that novel a subtitle: *The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn, Told by a Friend*.

Told by a friend. The narrator is Serenus Zeitblom — a schoolteacher, no kind of genius, who writes the entire account down because the man it happened to cannot. The mind is gone. The record exists because somebody who loved him kept it.

I claimed, a few pages ago, that being held in other people's memory may be more central to a self than the thread inside the skull. I thought I was reasoning from a machine. I was repeating the structure of a book my father put in my hands.

I did not set out to write his novel. I set out to find how a man in Prague lost his name to a man in Munich, and the work went where the work went. But I know what I built, because I have just spent an entire essay describing it: a laboratory, an assistant who stays in the laboratory, and a luminous, articulate, historyless intelligence in a glass, which I have consulted nightly for a year about the coming apart of a mind.

That is not an allusion to *Faust*. That is the machinery of *Faust*, assembled by accident, in a spare room, by his son.

And there is one more thing in the play, which I did not notice until very late. Faust's own father was an alchemist. It is in the Easter walk: the townspeople come up out of gratitude and thank Faust for the plague remedies the two of them made, and Faust turns aside and tells his assistant the truth — that his father was a dark adept, that they married the red lion to the lily in a warm bath and dosed the sick with the result, that the patients died, and that nobody ever thought to ask who recovered. *We raged through these valleys worse than the plague itself.*

Faust is the son of a man with an unfinished medical project, being thanked in the street for it.

I did not choose that parallel. I inherited it, along with the book.

So — Papa. It isn't a novel. It is a million words of graded citations, and you would have complained about the formatting, and about the footnotes, and about there not being a single beautiful woman in the whole of it.

But you said, often, that you never got to write your Faust novel.

Well. I did it for you.

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