

On October 7th, 1955, around 9pm Allen Ginsberg stood up at the 6 Gallery in San Francisco, and read aloud his poem Howl for the first time:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving
hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry
fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the
starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the
supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of
cities contemplating jazz,
who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels
staggering on tenement roofs illuminated. . .

And so it goes. We are presented with a litany of despair, and various unsustainable, self-destructive remedies to this despair—notably random travel, drug use, and gratuitous and emotionally detached sex.

This poem sparked what became called the Beat movement, itself a clear precursor of the counter-cultural movements of the 1960's. This was a pivotal moment, in my view, in our cultural history.

39 years before this, on July 14th, 1916, in Zurich, Switzerland, Hugo Ball had read aloud the first Dada Manifesto:

“How does one achieve eternal bliss? By saying dada. How does one become famous? By saying dada. With a noble gesture and delicate propriety. Till one goes crazy. Till one loses consciousness. How can one get rid of everything that smacks of journalism, worms, everything nice and right, blinkered, moralistic, europeanised, enervated? By saying dada. Dada is the world soul, dada is the pawnshop. Dada is the world's best lily-milk soap. Dada Mr Rubiner, dada Mr Korrodi. Dada Mr Anastasius Lilienstein. In plain language: the hospitality of the Swiss is something to be profoundly appreciated. And in questions of aesthetics the key is quality.”

The Dada movement marked the beginning of the abandonment of form in art, and of the effort to care about beauty or aesthetic elevation, much less create it. When we see a crucifix in urine, it started here. It began as a reaction to the devastation of World War 1, of the grand narratives like patriotism, social responsibility, and ultimately of the meaning of life itself. Ginsberg himself references Dada later in his poem:

“who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy”.

Dada, you see, is precisely about the abandonment of rational thought, and thus Dada itself cannot be appreciated rationally. As what we might term the Fury of irrationality, it refuses to be named, according to its' practitioners (who cannot be understood as practitioners), and the meaning of their acts—understood usefully as proto-performance art—inheres in their very meaninglessness. If this does not make sense, that was the point.

This is a spirit, a geist, that in my view made its' way across the ocean to America formally in Ginsberg's Howl. To call this worldview irresponsible, or anti-social, is to miss the point that talented people—"the best minds of my generation"—fell and fall victim to it.

At its' root, I believe this malady--what I will term ontological illness—is the progression of mourning that cannot be completed. Socially coherent mourning, in my view, is characterized by the pain of loss, and then the pain of readjustment back into society as a new person. One must reimagine, reinvent, recreate, a world without a loved person, belief, or institution. One must leave, and then return home.

And just as a fetus removed before viability withers and dies for lack of a congenial environment, a place which supports life, so too these people--these artists who in another age could have been instrumental in defining an age of beauty—fade in their mental and emotional integrity and begin howling incoherently. They have left their homes, and feel banished, East of Eden.

Anyone who has been in an art museum, a modern art museum, has been compelled to wonder what it is that drives modern artists. What are they after? What are they trying to say? What is the point of cutting a cow in sections and displaying each piece, with its' innards clearly visible? What is the point of a blank or almost blank canvas? Why are lines thrown haphazardly from a pricked paint can profound? Why should one look at Marilyn Monroe's face in ten different colors?

In my view, all of this is of a piece with the Dadaists, and Ginsberg. It is a collapse that leads them to run naked, muttering incoherently, in the rain.

In my young adulthood, these issues troubled me greatly. I am now 40, and in many ways, they have troubled me since.

It has become difficult to achieve maturity in our modern age, to take up the mantle of our Fathers, since in the collision of cultural currents of nonsensical hysteria along the lines of Dada, traditionalism, and our newly minted "Cult of the Expert"—here understood as the professional mental health worker—no single narrative, no single story, no universally accepted account remains as to what or who one ought to be as a worthy individual within American society.

Collectively, this process can be termed Deconstruction. Defined, deconstruction is "A philosophical movement and theory of literary criticism that questions traditional

assumptions about certainty, identity, and truth; asserts that words can only refer to other words; and attempts to demonstrate how statements about any text subvert their own meanings: "In deconstruction, the critic claims there is no meaning to be found in the actual text, but only in the various, often mutually irreconcilable, 'virtual texts' constructed by readers in their search for meaning" Rebecca Goldstein."

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/deconstruction>

All you really need to know about Deconstruction, you can infer from the quotes at the beginning of this chapter. It is summarized by the title of a Talking Heads album "Stop making Sense".

Although the texts associated with this movement are among the densest in any language, this is the basic theme. They want to deny the possibility of what they consider to have been the conceits of the Enlightenment.

"You want to talk of Truth", they say: "so show me this Truth. Show me Justice while you are at it. Show me how to assess the value of Patriotism. In the first World War, all those 20 million who died, died for their countries. They died for Justice. They died, in short, for Truth. Yet both sides claimed Truth. Which side was right? The one that won?"

They continue: "do you really want to claim that we should privilege the narratives of the victors—the stories told by their cultural "shopkeepers", the historians—over those who have been conquered? We were told the invasions in Africa and Asia, those in Tunisia, Algeria, India, Southeast Asia, even those in the Americas, were for the good of those peoples. But who is to say this is the case? Why do our ideas count more than theirs? How can you say they are better as Christians? How can you say they are better off, having been decimated by disease, and having been robbed of their land?"

"All of these things were done in the name of Grand Ideas. Of the White Man's Burden, of Manifest Destiny. And our modern slaughters in the name of patriotism, or the name of twisted theories of racial superiority."

"No", we hear, "much better to understand that within every story there are as many meanings as persons reading it. This prevents that collation of confident falsehoods, and the violence that follows. Peace will only come when we stop believing that we are right to the exclusion of all others."

And such authors, pursuant to this logic, set themselves the rather unenviable task of writing books that have no grand narratives of their own. Books which attempt to show the incoherence of narratives through the medium of narratives. As one may expect, this produces prose which is nearly and intentionally impenetrable. Here is one passage, selected essentially at random, from the famous book by Jacques Derrida "On Grammatology":

“The science of writing should therefore look for its object at the roots of scientificity,. The history of writing should turn back toward the origin of historicity. , A science of the possibility of science? A science of science which would no longer have the form of logic but that of *grammatics*? A history of the possibility of history which would no longer be an archaeology, a philosophy of history or a history of philosophy?”

One gets the sense he is digging, but one also gets the sense that no clear conclusions will be forthcoming in the near (or distant) future that will be truth claims in any sense. He never quite works himself into a position where he is sufficiently clear that one can say “that makes sense”, or “he is wrong here”.

No, what he does is create a prose modeled on that of the Cubists—possibly even the Dadaists--where all sense of proportion and perspective has been demolished, leaving only a sense of vertigo, and a teasing sense of the possibility of having learned something. But one is never sure.

And in practice, Deconstructionists run into this problem: what to believe? They want to deconstruct all narratives. They want to clear the air of the fetid odor of the crimes of humanity across all of the recorded ages, and usher in, through the absence of compelling counternarratives to the reign of peace, an era of harmony.

But you cannot create with a gap. You cannot suck in, through an intellectual vacuum of sorts, the sort of order and harmony you want. Our bodies are in constant motion. Our societies and indeed our world are both in constant motion. If one must go and do, where to go and what to do?

Well, that quote was taken off of www.marxists.org. While not exactly a Marxist saint, Derrida was unquestionably a fellow traveler. When I get to examining politics, I will return to this point.

I do want to share briefly one analogy, though. In the book “Treasure of Santa Vittoria”, German troops take over a small village in Italy, and are at a certain point commanded to find the wine that the villagers had hid. Being Germans, they methodically, systematically, painstakingly go through the whole village, every house, top to bottom, no board unturned, nothing untouched. They find nothing. As they are marching down the hill to their local command, one of the soldiers points to a large cave—which unlike any of the homes is plenty large enough to fit the required amount of wine, and is in fact where they hid it, as should have been self evident—and asks if they should search there. His commander says “leave it alone. We’ve been looking all day.”

Excessive care about non-essential details, and a complete lethargy with respect to those that matter. As the Wen Tzu puts it: “If you measure by inches, you are sure to be off by the time you reach ten feet”.

One sees this tendency in many of the philosophers and literary critics of Deconstructionism, which I should add is really a tendency, not an “Ism”, per se. In this

respect, one must, again, view them as analogous with Dadaists. A proper Deconstruction of Deconstructionism would show you that, like all texts (text being understood as any purported meaning-containing narrative, conveyed verbally, visually, kinesthetically—as dance, for example—or in any other manner) Deconstructionism cannot be maintained as a meaning containing system. It is precisely an absence.

In my own view, the best functional definition of Deconstruction is “the consumption of one narrative by another”. The narrative of meaninglessness is also a narrative, isn’t it? It is possible, too, to complete the mourning others were not able to complete, and to reach new conclusions that can be supported rationally and factually which act to improve the situation in which we find ourselves, isn’t it?

In any event, I will examine the emotional underpinning of this momentarily, but would like to make one last comment on language.

A great deal of ink has been spilled in the Academy—in the Humanities specifically—over notions of language. It has been found—rediscovered, no doubt, since the point is obvious—that words and objects are not intrinsically related. The German word for horse is Pferd. In Chinese it is Ma. Linguistically, in terms of the value or appropriateness of the various phonetic representations of the concept horse, expressed verbally, or in written form, one cannot privilege one as more “right” than another. Further, one must observe that some words have no objective referents. Justice, for example, is very much interpreted differently by different cultures and peoples. When one people says Justice, another people—seeing someone having a wall toppled on them for homosexuality—may say Brutality. Thus, given phenomena X, we not only have different words, but different meanings associated with words.

Is there, then, such a thing as Justice, understood in any lasting, permanent, Platonic (remember the cave and the “Really Real” giving off shadows) way? No, they answer, and trying to find such a thing only leads to trouble. It led to Colonialism, and two World Wars, slavery, and a host of other evils.

This basic pattern, of course, leads immediately to the doctrine of Moral Equivalence. This doctrine states that no principle of morality stands in qualitative superiority to any other principle of morality. On the face of it, this makes sense, and one sees this—as an example—in the headlines when protesters condemn Bush as a Fascist. Since they dislike Bush, and they dislike Fascists, and since no one really needs to fool with details any more—since all words are lies in the process of being discovered—they see no logical or perceptual errors in this. It sounds good, and after all they are on the side of justice.

But wait, how can that be? Didn’t we just Deconstruct Justice? Well, there is deconstruction, and DECONSTRUCTION. Mostly, practically, this technique is used to assault Western narratives supporting things like democracy and justice overseas. Since there seems to be an all too human need to believe something, they do not apply this same tactic to the narratives of other nations.

Through an interesting twist, we wind up in a position that since all narratives are equal, we can only condemn our own. And since all narratives are bad, and since we have a narrative, it needs to be condemned. And since we just deconstructed our own narrative, we can no longer deconstruct anyone else's. We have no tools, no criteria, by which to do this. Our own notions of justice have been jettisoned, so we will have to use those of others. And this is how Israel winds up getting blamed constantly for having the temerity to be attacked. I think it is that simple.

Overlooked, as well, is a patent logical contradiction in this whole calculus of moral equivalence (also called moral or cultural relativism, and multiculturalism, although this last is a bit inaccurate): the principle that no principles are better than other principles, is itself a principle. By what basis can they claim that, for example, a medieval Arabic Sheikdom which freely tolerates the rape of women, refuses to educate them, keeps them locked up, and which still allows slavery, is morally equivalent to, say, Sweden, which offers nearly all rights imaginable?

Although they would not rise to the bait of such a stark comparison—this mindset leads to endless equivocation, since they have already abandoned the need to make sense, since making sense is a narrative—there is no doubt that this is where the logic of the proposition leads, and anyone who would want to claim differently would need to be able to articulate principles by which to effect that comparison. And in so doing, would be compelled by that use of logic in most cases to reverse their opinions in other areas, or admit the contradictory nature of their beliefs.

This is why the prominent Leftist George Lakoff tells his followers not to answer questions framed by rightists. Rightists tend to favor relatively stable principle based narratives, within which contradiction is possible. Contradiction is NOT possible within a narrative that is not a narrative. That is both its utility, and of course its fatal flaw.

Enough on that. Although I will articulate proposed solutions to what might be termed the “truth problem”, I would like to take a moment and comment on what I view as the emotional backing of this hornet’s nest of irrationality.

What we see on display, hidden, in my view, is the pain of a thousand years. We see grief that is so compelling that it is swallowed and hidden from conscious awareness. We see sensitive people who see the pain of history, who see horrible fates suffered by decent people, who see the ugliness of war, and the potential catastrophes made possible by modern technology, and we see a combination of abject terror, mourning, and anger.

Terror and anger of course, are flip sides of one another, with the difference that the emotion of anger, in and of itself, can provide a subjective sensation of meaning. Of being possessed by a higher purpose. It can provide the feeling, but not intellectual coherence.

Terror can lead to anger, in the sense that we get mad at those we feel are endangering us. It does not provide a sense of meaning, but does provide an impulse to action.

Finally, mourning. It will be a principle thesis of mine that how societies deal with pain determines the qualitative level to which they are capable of attaining. I cannot conceive of a stable society that does not have suffering in it. Pain is essential for growth, and mourning is the process by which we integrate a loss into a reimagination of our selves that is deeper and better than what we were before.

My belief is that in a healthy society, with a healthy national narrative, the pains which these deconstructionists feel would be integrated into happiness and progress, and not these negative feelings of sadness, anger, and fear.

This raises the question, though, as to what a healthy society is. I have an answer, but need first to offer a mea culpa: this book is broken. It must be, since from all possible perceptions, I cannot have made them all. This book is flawed, and must be understood as such.

But, it can usefully be understood and treated as provisionally right, subject to future verification and constant recalibration.

And this is one part of my solution to the problem posed by the Deconstructionists. You see, narratives are not either true or untrue. They can be partly true—which makes them incomplete at the current moment—and they can be contingently, provisionally true—which makes them true for the moment.

If I see a shadow on the ground, and think it to be a snake, that is a provisional truth. A moment later, when I see it is a vine, that is still a provisional, partial truth. All truth is best understood, in my view, as provisional and partial. As potentially useful, and in the event necessary for continued survival. We have to make decisions in this world, and there is no reason not to approximate truth as well as we can, understanding that our constant approximations will never precisely create a congruence between our mental images and perceptible reality.

Truth, then is a direction of movement. It is a living quality. What, then, ought to be the direction of movement? This is an interesting question.

If I am wandering in the desert—which as a culture, at least our “high” culture, we are, in many respects—and I set off towards a rock on the horizon I believe may be near water, I have done two things. I have selected one possible destination from many, based on my suspicion of its’ relative desirability, and I have roughly determined a route. Now, the route may vary, but provided the destination does not change, that spot is fixed.

In terms of abstraction—relativistic abstractions—how does this translate? First off, in order to need to “perform” an abstraction, you need to have a selected destination. (Quite often, you do not need to perform an abstraction at all, such as when you are sweeping the floor. Buddhists talk about this often, as will I, after a while. First things first.)

In order to select one destination over another, you must have a criteria. For me, the most sensible criteria is joy. I want generalized joy for as many people as I can manage, with the number steadily growing until all of humanity is living in a manner conducive to profound contentment and happiness.

This is my destination. My route is determined by perception, by my time and space delimited contingent truths. If I want water, the exact route I take to it is vastly less important than the fact of arrival. Likewise here: what matters is the attainment of the objective, not the means.

Given that we are all social animals, and given that small things like mass terrorist attacks, starvation, disease and a host of other things will tend on balance to thwart general social integration of deep happiness, I need goals in the social arena too. I need intermediate destinations en route to my water in the palm trees.

For this reason, I would like to propose that social systems be understood as composed of 4 parts: a meaning system, a truth system, a political system, and an economic system. Each one will be dealt with extensively in turn, but for now let me state that each system depends on the one prior to it, and has it's own objective. For the Meaning system the purpose is joy; for Truth, efficacy; for politics personal liberty, and for economics, wealth.

As I've indicated, my intention is not to follow the Deconstructionists and conclude that since bad decisions have been made confidently, that confidence is bad. What I conclude is that dumb decisions yield bad results, and that better decisions are always possible, and that that is the point of perception. For this reason, there will be a great deal of attention paid to perception.

Truth will be understood in what I will argue is its' classical, proper, scientific usage, which is the study of the linkage of cause and effect. If I drop a weight, useful science will tell me what speed it will drop at. If I mix chemical A and chemical B, then useful science will predict the result. Formally, I can never say that I fully understand the final causation—or even that there is final causation—but I can state that without exception all trials predicting x, y, or z have been successful.

Useful truth, more generally, is that which creates the effect that I want. I do not care about the precise mechanism by which it operates, either. Predictability is sufficient, and theory is proposed solely and specifically to enable further refinement in the scope or precision of my predictions. This is often called the Black Box. If I put input A into a "box"—whose inside is opaque to me, but which makes whirring and gushing noises--and output B is invariably seen to follow, the reason why this happens is infinitely subordinate to the fact that it happens reliably.

Our goals are Joy, personal liberty, and wealth. Each will be dealt with in turn, but for now I will point out simply that my provisional, Black Box truth claim is that wealth

facilitates liberty (more particularly, the power to protect it), and the point of liberty is the creation of joy, and that joy cannot be created outside of a condition of being Good.

This is my construction—my anti-Deconstruction, if you will. I have not seen anything precisely like it, and for clarity of statement and ease of understanding, it works well.