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# SHOTS IN THE DARK: THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE IN IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE (IW)

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**SHOTS IN THE DARK: THE PRESENCE OF  
ABSENCE IN IMAGINATIVE  
WRITING (IW)**

Shots in the Dark. One step forward, one back, one to the side, slightly askew. Answerable, possibly answerable and unanswerable questions. Mini thought-experiments on common topics. An invitation to the reader to "piece out our imperfections with your thoughts" (Prologue, *Henry V*).<sup>i</sup>

The first part of these "shots" are phrased mostly as propositions. The second part is a mix of questions and short commentaries. The third part is on absence and the Other.

Western metaphysics and IW can be described as a search for "first" presences, not absences. With the exception of philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Aristotle, writers like Lord Rochester (John Wilmot), Jonathan Swift and Philip Larkin, no one, to my knowledge, has taken absence as a "first" and consequently as also a "last." This essay is a modest attempt to open the door, if only a crack, for investigations into the metaphysics and meaning of absence as a means of creating, and understanding an *interesting* IW—from the perspective of the presence of absence as "first" and as "last."

I first began thinking about absence as a "first" (and presence a "second" as a reaction to a "first") from watching the behavior of animals, especially the horses and cats I loved and still love.

-0. Absence, not presence, is the "sun" of the "solar system" of IW. It keeps "satellites" in rotation around it. From a cosmic perspective it acts much like a black hole, acting from a distance and consuming everything that comes "too" near it. This "being too near" is best exemplified by death as closure to a IW text. Please think of how *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* end in silence.

#### Part One

-0a. Presence: From Latin *prae*- "before" and *esse* "to be."

-0b. Absence: From Latin *ab*- "away" and *esse* "to be."

-0c .Other: Old English *anþar* "there," "over there"; Indo-European *anteros* "one of two." (See Buck).

-0d. In a recent article in *The New Yorker* James Wood claims that "A struggle is often going on in a novel, between present and past, instance and form, free will and determinism, secular expansion and religious contraction."<sup>iii</sup> I would like to add to this some thought runs what can be called the struggle in IW (in all forms of writing, especially poetry and fiction) between presence and absence. Both presence and absence, I will say, is anything with one or more of the following properties, ones given to

the subject by a writer: 1) Existence, 2) Specific Location 3) Duration 4) Person 5) Other and 6) Causal efficacy (please see Kahn).

0. Where there is light there is presence.

01. Where there is darkness there is absence.

03. The universe of IW is a combination of darkness with light.

04. IW is analogous to the universe.

05. The total mass-energy of the known universe contains 4.9% ordinary, 26.8% dark matter and 68.3% dark energy. Thus, dark matter is estimated to constitute 84.5% of the total matter in the universe, while dark energy plus dark matter constitute 95.1% of the total content of the universe.

06. IW contains more absence than presence.

07. Absence makes it possible to think paradoxically.

07. Paradoxes absent themselves from presences to state important truths.

1. The result of a struggle in IW is always an absence.

1a: Absence, as a negative fact, is more "exhaustive" than presence as a positive fact. Please see below #8.

1b: Absences as negation are more dramatic than presences:

1c: Weakness as the absence of strength is a "gigantic strength":

"I have brought nothing with me of what life requires, so far as I know, but only the universal human weakness. With this ↓ in this respect it is

[a] gigantic strength↓I have vigorously absorbed the *negative element* of the age in which I live, an age that is, of course, very close to me, which I have no right ever to fight against, but as it were, a right to represent" (Rev. Reiner Stach's *Kafka's Die Jahre die Jahr der Erkenntnis TLS*, April 24, 2009: 7)

1d: *Alswa*: the Old English word, from which we get the adverb "as," is the most important word for transforming, semantically, a presence into an absence or vice versa. An example, discussed later in this essay is the opposing pair, cooperative and conflict. Either adding, or subtracting certain properties from one or the other we can make one into the other. If members of a community cooperate with each other than the effect is order and peace. If there is conflict, the effect is disorder and war, the absence of order and peace. Or please take the pair failure/success. In mountain climbing to summit the mountain means success. Not to summit, failure. In the former case, the means to the end (success) were favorable, say the weather, the training and experience of the climbers, their equipment and the like. In the latter case, some or all of these "means" were absent.

2: Using mathematical language we can say that existence, space, time and causality are "constants," and presence and the absence "variables." Like gravity and the speed of light existence, space and the others are always the

same everywhere in the universe—everywhere in IW. They "hold" the elements together and keep them in moving in proper ways.

2a: Every constant and variable in IW represents an accommodation with, and a representation of, the experience of the writer and what h/s can imagine has sensed.

2b: Family resemblance: (*Familienähnlichkeit*) In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein says that "things which may be thought to be connected by one essential common feature may in fact be connected by a series of overlapping similarities, where no one feature is common to all" (Item #66). With this in mind we can claim that words like "real," "fact," "actual" etc do not all mean exactly the same thing but they have overlapping similarities. We can also claim that they mean, however roughly, "to be present." Conversely, words like "lie," "absent," "failure," "missing" "lost," "lacking" etc. mean (or presuppose) "to be absent."

2c: . Absence is frequently not finding what we expect to find.

2d: The unexpected is the lack of a natural property of some object.

2e: Sight is a natural property of the eye.

2f: Blindness is then an unexpected absence of a natural property of the eye.

2g: An unexpected property is an example of absence.

2h An expected property is an example of a presence.

3: Presence and absence have their exits and entrances in IW.

3a: Exits and entrances exist for a cause. Odysseus' exit from Ithaca for 20 years causes a space to open for Penelope's suitors to enter the story.

Gulliver's exit from England, and his entry into Houyhnhmland, allows him to 1) take on horse-like characteristics, 2) recognize that Yahoos are humans, 3) desert his wife and family for stable horses.

3b: The absence of Odysseus and Gulliver have causal efficacy in IW.

3c: Birth, life, death as exits and entrances: *Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo* (*I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care*). An expression attributed to the Greek philosopher Epicurus.

4: Presence and absence obey the law of non-contradiction. They cannot be in the same place, in the same way. Only the Abrahamic God violates this law.

4a: In order for true statements to be made about presence and absence they must obey the law of non-contradiction. (For more, please consult "The Law of Non-Contradiction" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)

5: Presence is the familiar, absence the unfamiliar.

5a: A quest is always from the familiar to the unfamiliar. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came;*

5b: Becoming absent is always a kind of travel through time and place.

5c: Selflessness, or empathy, is becoming absent from apathy.

5d: Presence is becoming absent from apathy and indifference.

6: Being lost is absence from a prior presence:

"Getting *lost* appears to be a major theme in European Literature. From Odysseus' long *detour* home, to Dante's midlife *crisis* in the *selva oscura*, to the *abandoned* children of the Brothers Grimm, it would seem that the straight way' is rarely the best way to *make an interesting story*." (Benfey 40.)

6a: Becoming lost involves time and (sometimes) space travel.

7: Lying, faking, pretending are important elements of IW:

"As for *lying*, it seems to me that *falsehood* is a critical element in fiction. Part of the thrill of being told a story is the chance of being *hoodwinked or taken*. Nabokov is a master at this. The telling of *lies* is a sort of sleight of hand that displays our deepest feelings about life. "

John Cheever.

(<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3667/the-art-of-fiction-no-62-john-cheever>)

\*"Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life is my life....T go



around in disguise. To act a character. To pass one self off as what one is not. To pretend" (Philip Roth, in an interview for the *Paris Review*, 1984)

8: Any term referencing to a presence, "real," "fact," "the actual," can become an absence reference through negation, "unreal," "non-factual," "not-actual."

8a: Absence by means of negation is more "exhaustive" than the affirmation of presence:

Knowing how things are *not* gives you knowledge of exhaustiveness.

If there is any *reduction* to be achieved, it runs from *positive* facts to *negative* facts. For instance, one *reductive* strategy is to exploit a kind of double *negation*, to say that the cat is on the mat is to say that there is *no negative* fact of the cat *not* being on the mat (Sorenson 227).

9: Action is always a presence.

8b: Inaction is always an absence.

8c: Absence is withdrawal from action:

8d: Presence is commitment to action.

8e: Crossing a threshold is analogous to going into action. Please read Lord

Krishna's remarks to Ijuna on the subject of action/inaction and their different effects (*The Bhagavad Gita* 2:23-41).

8f: Pausing on the threshold is analogous to the fear of going into action.

8g: Turning on the threshold is withdrawal from action.

Arjuna sat down on the chariot seat/

In the midst of battle/

And let go of both his bow and arrow/

His whole being recoiling in grief (*The Bhagavad Gita* 1:47)

8h: Primum non nocere (first, do no harm). Principle guiding doctors in pre-modern age.

8i: The classic IWs of action/inaction include:*The Bhagavad Gita; The Iliad; Hamlet*

8j: Classic IWs represent "is/is not" as a struggle. Hamlet's "to be/not to be" is a paradigm example.

9. Definitions, of necessity, answer questions about absences, of what X-definition does not include. Please see Lord Rochester's poem, "Upon Nothing" (1689).

9a A classic IW "bears an excess of permanence of meaning, yet always resists definitive interpretation, it claims authority because of the intensification of meaning and value that occurs in the work" (David Tracy).

9b: Absent from a classic IW is limited meaning, definitive interpretation and lack of authority and value.

9c: A non-classic text stops short of being read a 100 years from year of publication (Samuel Johnson).

10: Memory recalls absences to presences.

10a: Presence is the recognition of an absence.

10: Presence is essentially an object of perception.

10a: Absence is an object of experience plus memory of experience.

11: Propositions dwell in the house of presence as the owners of the house.

Questions dwell in the house of absence as renters.

## Part Two

In this section, my "Shots" take the form of short commentaries on absence and presence in IW and questions. Questions fall into three categories, the answerable, the possibly answerable, the unanswerable.

1: Imagination: In order to image X we have to have experiences with both presence and absence plus had holds them together. The complete effect is not, binary, but triadic. IW is always a third thing, a product of presence and

absence. In the product, there must always be its interpretability, an answer to "what does it mean."

2: C. S. Peirce. The triadic nature of the imagination, as product of presence and absence, was a deep concern of the American philosopher and mathematician, C. S. Peirce:

Now let me turn to Peirce and his Theory of Signs and how it would treat negative facts, not just to create a story, but an *interesting* one. The word "interest" comes, of course, from the convergence of the Latin "inter" ("between") and "to be" ("esse"): "It is between us," "between you, me and the fence post," and so on. The infrastructure of the word is then (if we want to use some mathematical terminological) minimally composed of two constants and one variable, namely, whatever is between (at least) two constant extremes—in the case of storytelling the storyteller:story:audience.

Peirce's Theory of Signs has three parts. One Peircean scholar, Albert Alkin, calls these parts, respectively, "the sign vehicle," "the object," and "the interpretant." ("Interpretant" is a coinage of Peirce). What follows is what might be called a "translation" of these parts into the realm of absence and presence.

## THE SIGN-VEHICLE

Absence biased words, "lost," "blind," "lying," "failure" and the like do not signify an object in all its aspects—only those that allow an interpretation of the object to take place. 'Blind,' for example, does not tell us everything about eyes, (their color, shape, and so on) but only that they lack sight, a property they would have naturally. Similarly with "absence." Say I expect to meet you for coffee at the Straw Ibis at 10:00 A. M. today. I arrive and you are not there. Your absence negates my my expectation of your presence.

## THE OBJECT

The sign-vehicle is the absence-biased word and its object is anything that is "lost," "blind," or "absent." The object "determines" the word. That is, it imposes certain 'constraints' on what the word can signify in order to represent the object. Again, a word like "blind" cannot represent everything about the object. But it must represent some "characteristic" of the object that renders it intelligible, capable of an interpretation.

## THE INTERPRETANT

The object "determines" the interpretant by focusing our understanding on certain features of the relationship *between* the word and its object.

"Smoke," for example, determines our knowledge of fire, its object. If one does not interpret the presence of smoke as a sign of fire, then obviously h/s cannot come to an understanding of their relationship.

The constraint that absence-biased words cannot signify "all" features of its object, means that the un-signified features are positive facts about the object. "Blind" can only signify that something that would naturally occur in eyes is missing. The size, shape, color of eyes ("large," "round," "brown"), for example, signify properties we expect to find in eyes. As positive-biased words, they signify positive facts about the object (please see Aristotle on "privation," [steresis]. *Metaphysics* 8:9).

3. IW comes from mental representations. They are basic to IW, not to be explained in terms of anything else. The emphasis then is not so much as the semantics of language, but on what is going on in the mind. IW "think of something, presence, of the existent." But they also "think of that which is thought to exist but often does not, the absent or non-existent."

Belief in X is perhaps best seen as a relative concept, a form of personal knowledge, not shared by everyone. I may believe in miracles but you may not. I may believe in God but not you. I may believe in Santa Claus but not the person next door. But for a story to be interesting it must at some

level make you believe in the non-existent. This includes what Wood (above) calls "form" or the transcendent, the spiritual, the unseen.

I suggest we add to our file of beliefs one in absence as the non-existent, or that which is thought to exist but often does not. We not only find what exists interesting we also find what does not just as interesting. Both are usually necessary in creating a character for IW or recording one. As an example consider the cases of Sherlock Holmes versus that of Vladimir Putin of Russia (2014---). Holmes is a created character. Putin is a recorded, and recordable, one. He has objectivity and extra-mentality. Holmes, you might agree, does not exist. He has no actual location in time or space. He is not objective. He is in some way only in the mind. He cannot be seen in the flesh, photographed or be touched. Putin, like the Empire State Building, is a specific existent. he acts, if you will, as an anchor and beacon for our thoughts. We can think about him under different guises and still be thinking about him and not some one else, such as Barack Obama.

Yet we can think of Holmes as possessing certain qualities: such as

\*Male

\*Middle age

\*Detective

\*Friend (to Watson)

\*Intelligent

\*Younger brother to Mycroft (seven years older).

\*Famous

\*Etc.

I have neither the space or will establish the definitive differences between what exists and what do not: between Putin and Holmes. But a partial account might include the following by common qualities that converge and diverge (or how they are similar and how they are dissimilar) :

**Convergence:**

\*Both Putin and Holmes are mental representations. We can think about them.

\*Both men are the product of biological evolution. Both have had their DNA "copied" by their children, grandchildren, etc.

\*We can think what Putin and Holmes have done, or are going to do, without them actually have. We may misjudge them.

\*We can predicate certain qualities of each. Each is a male, of a certain age, is famous, one is single, one is married and so on.

**Convergence: Divergence:**



\*This is a middle category between convergence & divergence. These are stories that feature characters who derive their properties from existing (or once existent) properties but perform non-existent acts: as defined by existing criteria. Chaucer's pilgrims are an example

### **Divergence:**

\*Stories that personify inanimate (or non-human) characters violate the space, time and gravity of beings like Putin and Obama. Examples here include Aesop's Fables, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (the Houyhnhnms, i.e., horses) and perhaps the best known of children's books, *Los Tres Arboles: Cuento Tradicional* (The Tale of Three Trees: A Traditional Folktale)

4: How should we IW characters like Swift's Houyhnhnms and Strullbrugss, or Aesop's trees, as existing as an absence? If so what is the source of their existence? Following Crane, and many other phenomenologists (Edmund Husserl, Alexius Meinong and Franz Brentano) I will say they originate in mind-driven language.

5: Transcendence (*Trans scandia*; "to climb over). Let me begin, following certain statements by Vance, that transcendence takes two forms, the horizontal and the vertical (Norman Vance, *Bible and Novel*, Oxford UP, 2014). Both kinds presuppose a kind of travel, either physically,

emotionally, or imaginarily. The most common horizontal kind manifests itself as empathy. Empathy comes from the Greek *empathia* (*em* [into] and *pathos* [feeling]). It suggest that you enter another person's problems, or pain, as you might enter another country through immigration and customs, border crossings by way of the questions like: "What kind of trees do you have here?" "What kind of animals?" "What kind of miracles?"

In empathy you absent (and empty) yourself for another.

Another kind of horizontal transcendence is the "quest" for adventure, for knowledge or experience. It too is a kind of travel to a new country.

Under vertical transcendence we can include sacred music, say the spiritual music of Bach and Hayden, the song "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," pilgrimages to shrines. Location in a specific place, with special properties, can establish a connection with the spiritual. A salient example, from Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, is the opening scene in Rome with cardinals at a meal.

Beyond the balustrade (of the villa) was the drop into the air...far below the landscape stretched soft and undulating. There was Nothing to arrest the eye until it reach Rome itself....The Sun was still good for an hour of supreme splendour, and across The shining folds of country the low profile of the city fretted

The skyline...the light was full of action and had a peculiar  
Quality of climax-of splendid finish.

There is here a connection drawn between the secular (Rome the city) and the sacred. The secular is down, below, the sacred is up, elevated. This connection is suggested by the controlled gaze of the reader.

The goal of transcendence is enlightenment, salvation or knowledge of God or (in Hinduism) gods. As acts of absence, they involve an escape from ordinary acts (cooking, cleaning, paying taxes) and a journey inward.<sup>iii</sup>

Transcendence has no agenda. On this reading transcendence is a measure of the "distance" between what is immanent, or has the possibility of becoming immanent, in the world and what does not. A salient example is the Christian eucharis. In the bread and the wine the blood and body of Christ are immanent—at least to a Christian. But Christ, a triune god, transcends any immanence (persons, things, events) in power, authority and omniscience. The same is true of Krishna, a Hindu god. His authority, power, knowledge exceeds any immanence. But he is often immanent in the world, as in the *Bhagavad Gita* where he appears on the battlefield as Ijuna's chariot driver, mentor and interpreter of action.

Transcendence then includes not only what persons can do (do or make) and also what they would like to do but cannot. There is always a

struggle between the limits of our finitude and the desire to go beyond them. Charles Kahn's *Out of Eden*, a study of the sources of evil, turns on this premise.

5a: Controlling images of vertical transcendence include light, the up-direction, lightness of being, the color blue (the sky), an inward feeling of joy and so on. Lyric poetry depends heavily on them. Linguistically, such transcendence features the high front vowels "ee," sibilants, "-ing," and liquids "-ll

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—

While barrèd clouds bloom the soft-dying day        25

And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;

Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn

Among the river-sallows, borne aloft

Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;

And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;    30

Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft

The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft;

And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

(Keats "Ode to Autumn," last stanza)

5b. The secular and the transcendent: In spite of the complicated relationship between modern secularism and the so-called "death of God," can we say that the search for transcendence is most salient in storytelling. We may still need, in other words, in a secular world the category of the religious and some kind of religious narrative if we are to understand and explain our present and even our past. (cf. #1 above).

5c. Can we then say that the transcendent is closer to absence than to presence? Please recall that our working definition of absence is the lack of specific existence, the lack of specific duration and of a specific location.

6: The suffix -"ish": "Selfish, oldish, unicornish (like a unicorn) and so on. Here we presuppose an X that is part presence and part absence. But, in so far as we can name the species unicorn, we have the question "what are we naming?" Absences or presences? Three kinds of sentences about unicorns, rising from their absence and presence, are possible:

A. The unicorn took a drink from the stream and started to graze on some grass growing along the bank.

B. The unicorn is a fictional character in certain kinds of IW.

C. Unicorns had a high resemblance to my cow, Sally. They both have a twisty

horn, creamy white skin, and like to lie around all afternoon.

Sentence A does not even purport to refer to anything. Whoever wrote the sentence was not making an assertion about a presence. H/s was only asking the reader to "suspend h/s disbelief," in effect to have a mental representation of an animal of that species. Sentence B, however, is not part of an IW but a part of a description of a certain work of IW. It is a real statement about a character that appears in a certain kind of IW. Sentence C, finally, is also a true statement about a present, existing, IW character. But having properties like the cow Sally does not make the character an extra-mental object. Had God been keeping close watch on my barnyard He would not have observed such a creature as the animal that resembles Sally. He could, however, name it, "unicorn."

In speaking about IW we make two different kinds of statements about presence and absence. Ones we make *about* IW and ones *about* sentences *in* IW. In the former we are dealing with real presence. In the latter with real absence .

This essay is about IW. Quotations from writers working with absence and presence are sentences about what is *in* IW. (For more on this topic please consult Saul Kriphe, *Reference and Existence*. Oxford UP, 2013).

7. Absence has causal efficacy. Or how a statement about absence of X can cause dialogue and division. In Lucas Hnath's play, "The Christians," the scene is a church. The Pastor, Paul, tells his congregation one Sunday that there is no hell. It doesn't exist. He goes on to say that the word in Hebrew translates as "garbage dump." This causes the Assistant Pastor, Joshua, to challenge him. For him the Bible's literal truth must be upheld. When he cannot agree to follow Paul's new path, Joshua is invited to leave the church. He does so, sorrowfully, but taking many congregants with him.

The principle motive force in the movement of the play is the product of language, an interpretation, a convention held by the congregation as a whole and two individuals. Where was once a community, now there is fragmentation caused by three words, "there is no hell," seen as a threat to tradition and convention.

8: Nesting absences: Setting a scene in the desert one can "nest" (or group) absences. In Willa Cather's *Death Comes to the Archbishop*, Jean Marie Latour becomes lost in the desert of New Mexico. It is very hot.

The country in which he found himself was *featureless*-or rather, that it was crowded with features all exactly alike. He runs out of water. He and his mare are thirsty:

He began talking to his mare in halting Spanish, asking whether she agreed with him that it would be better to push on, weary as she was, in hope of finding the trail. He had no water left in his canteen and the horses had had none since yesterday morning...(they) were almost at the end of their endurance.

Please notice that absent-biased terms, "featureless," "thirst," "lack of water," "lost," gain strength from each other. Two beta males can defeat one alpha male. Double, triple or more absences is more exhaustive than one or any number of presence-biased terms.

But what is the point of Cather's rhetoric of exhaustion? Perhaps it is to emphasize the strength of Latour's faith and duty. He is willing to suffer and sacrifice objects that could be present (water; temperate climate, well marked trail) for a high calling. (For an excellent book on desert travel, perceived as absences, please see Alistair Carr, *The Nomad's Path: Travels in the Sahel* I.B Tauris 2014).

9. Mystery and Unknowingness. The Abrahamic God is never seen. The chief gods of Hinduism, Krishna and Shiva appear in the flesh in the *Upanisads* and *Bhagavad Gita*. They speak and listen to mortals like Ijuna and Dropada speak.



We can then say that the Abrahamic God is mostly absent, the Hindu gods present. Is there then more mystery about the former? If so, does that make His presence as absence more dramatic, more a subject of speculation?

A discussion of presence as positive versus absence as negative facts comes later in this essay.

10. Let me emphasize again that we take as a working, and contingent, definition of "presence" and "absence" what Kahn, Buck and others take to be the principal (semantic) meaning of the verb "to be" (and its nominal forms) in the Indo-European languages: namely, we use "to be" in all its forms to transmit information about 1) the existence of X, 2) its location and 3) its duration. Please note that each existence, location and duration, in this context, is taken as "specific," not general or abstract. The Eiffel Tower is specific. The tower of Rapunsal is not. It is not, as far as we know, on any map, in any guide book or findable location.

Here then absence correlates roughly with "non-existence" presence with "existence." But it well to remember that the correlation only holds if absence and presence are taken as variables, not constants.

With this in mind please note in the following the uses of the words "real" and "fictional":

Human beings seem to process information about fictional characters much the same way that they process information about real people. For example, in the 2008 United States presidential election, a politician and actor named Fred Thompson ran for the Republican Party nomination. In polls, potential voters identified Fred Thompson as a "law and order" candidate. Thompson plays a fictional character on the television series

(*Wikipedia* "Existence.")

11. Transformation. Stories that depict extreme transformations of status, class, wealth, power and so on rarely occur in fiction. But they are common in fairy tales, e.g, *Cinderella*, *Los Tres Arboles* allegories, Aesop, Kafka Calvino, and satire, Swift, Sterne, Nicolson Baker.

\*We cannot refer to Putin and Holmes in the same way with the same language. We cannot say "Putin and Holmes exist" that both have objectivity, or "extra-mental reality" in space and time. We can only say that of Putin.

12. Does a writer of IW have to think about present beings in order to create absent (out of the scene) characters? Do h/s have to think of beings like Obama and Putin in order to create characters like Holmes and Walter

Mitty? J. N. Finley, a phenomenologist, calls this the "puzzling character of thought about the non-existent." In other words, how it possible to think about what exists at the same time think about what does not.

13. Is thinking about absence a detraction from serious thinking about presence? If so, can this have serious consequences? Listen to what this thinker has to say. Please read "absence" for "non-existent":

It is all very well to pay the regard to thought about the non-existent in

Our account of mentality and the semantics of fiction, but there is a

Stern scientific stance we need to adopt when dealing with non-fiction,

Whether it be in the workplace, science, history or the courts.

In these circumstances, thinking of the non-existent is at best an

Distraction and at worst an error, of variable gravity. Accident

Investigators want to know the real causes of the accident,

historians. What really lay behind the war, astrophysists what

really accounts for the rapid rotation of galaxies. (*TLS* February

28, 2014:9).

14. Reverse Engineering: With this we might want to say that such

"engineering" has as its purpose is to deduce design decisions from end products with little or no additional knowledge about the procedures involved in the original starting point. Suppose then we start with, not with the presence of X, but with its absence. All our IWs begin with the thinking of something missing or lost.

Please recall that our working definition of "absence" is something missing in what might possibly not be missing; or something not there which we expect to be .

15. Is thinking about absence something like dreaming? Like dreams, many literary characters have an ethereal, often fragmented, presence. Think about the ghost in *Hamlet*, Macbeth's vision of a dead Banquo, or IW drawn from Greek myths, say, Pygmalion.

16. Does a IW writer work essentially the same way with absence that a painter, or any visual artist work? Think of the techniques of chiaroscuro or the depiction of shadows in Rembrandt or Carravaggio.

17. Do we often become confused by the differences in thinking about presence and absent beings? Is this because we lack secure internal and phenomenal markers of such differences?

18. Is our guarantee of veracity almost at stake with figures like Cinderella or Rapunzel?

19. The presence of an absence, or the unborn as causal effect. While trying not to labor the obvious, in both passages below the unborn child starts, motivates and sustains the action. In the Hemingway version please note the repetition of the pronoun "it." The unborn child has, as yet, no gender and, in high probability, no future life.

\*"A lonely couple, who want a child, live next to a walled garden of a sorceress. The wife, experiencing the cravings associated with the arrival of her long-awaited pregnancy, notices a rapunzel plant (or, in some versions of the story, ampion), growing in the garden and longs for it, desperate to the point of death. One night, her husband breaks into the garden to gather some for her; on a second night, as he scales the wall to return home, the enchantress catches him and accuses him of Rapunzel. He begs for mercy, and she agrees to be lenient, on condition that the then-unborn child be raised by her.

Desperate, he agrees. When the baby is born, the enchantress takes her to raise as her own, and names her Rapunzel, after the plant her mother craved. She grows up to be the most beautiful child in the world with long golden hair. When she reaches her twelfth year, the enchantress shuts her away in a tower in the middle of the woods, with neither stairs nor a

door, and only one room and one window. When she visits her, she stands beneath the tower and calls out: 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair.'

\*'They're lovely hills,' she said. 'They don't really look like white elephants.'

'It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig,' the man said. 'It's not really an operation at all.'

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

'I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in.'

The girl did not say anything.

'I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural.'

'Then what will we do afterwards?'

'We'll be fine afterwards. Just like we were before.'

'What makes you think so?'

'That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy.' (Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants")

20. Keats negative capability. "I had not a dispute but a disquisition with [Dilke](#), upon various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in *uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason* - Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated *verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge*. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration." (my emphasis)

21. Pascal's wager. "It posits that humans all bet with their lives either that God exists or does not exist. Given the possibility that God actually does exist and assuming the infinite gain or loss associated with belief in God or with unbelief, a rational person should live as though God exists and seek to believe in God. If God does not actually exist, such a person will have only a finite loss (some pleasures, luxury, etc.)."

Here we see a struggle between disbelief and belief in God distinguished by the respective effects of each.

22. Swift and satire. Swift's satire, especially in *A Tale of a Tub*, *Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, and *Battle of the Books*, prominently feature a reduction from presence (positive facts) to absences (negative ones). Here is a salient passage from *A Tale: The Conclusion*:

I am now trying an experiment very frequent among modern Authors; which is, to *write upon nothing*, when the subject is Utterly exhausted, to let the pen still move on, by some called, the ghost of wit delighting to walk after the death of the body. See also in *A Tale* sections entitled "An Apology" and "The Epistle Dedicatory to His Royal Highness Prince Posterity."

23. Sterne and Comedy. Please see my article in *The Shandean*, "Proper Function and the Comedy of Tristram Shandy" (forthcoming 2014). The article demonstrates that Sterne, also working in a reduction from presence (positive facts) to absences (negative facts), transforms proper function of things, events, ideas, into ones with improper functions.

24. Dark. The confessional boxes of the Catholic Church are usually dark. What is the absence of light intended to convey? Does it have a different effect on adults and children? What is the history of the confessional and its



connection to understanding the signification of the dark box? (Please see John Cornwell. *The Dark Box*. Profile 2014).

25. Zombies, fear of absence as a void. Zombies are everywhere right now, breaking out of horror into mainstream culture. Reasons for the craze abound; fear of the Other, fear of catastrophe, an aware that we're enslaved by consumer culture to the point of lobotomy, a sense that death will get us however much we deny it.

But surely this is fear of the void.

it4b. It is arguable that the two main subjects of stories are love and war. Do we fall in love and go to war, at least in part, because we seek transcendence, the something missing from our lives here and now? My chief concern here, after a few thought-runs on negation and negative facts, is with literary characters, *as* non-existent (by the above criteria) beings and how they converge and diverge from existing beings, Putin, Obame and so on. <sup>iv</sup>

\*Existence. This is the existence (enjoyed?) by Putin, myself and those unfortunate few now reading this. The storyteller and h/h reader.

\*Non-Existence. Neither Holmes nor Putin. Extreme divergence from Existence.

Only possible some unknown time in the future: say the complete disappearance of all videos, movies, texts, memory of Holmes and Putin.

\*The convergence and/or divergence of Existence and Non-Existence.

I said above, following Kahn, that "is/is not" (or any form, verbal or nominal of "to be/bit to be") presupposes three properties of existence, existence and non-existence themselves location non-location (not findable) and duration/atemporal.

say that there is fictional existence and fictional I will claim that storytelling (or fiction in general) contains characters that exhibit different degrees (or levels) of non-existence.

For here on out things become more problematic to certain readers. My hope, however, is that they provide a few beachheads, however shallow and narrow, for further exploration into the interior of this vast continent.

1b: How is it possible for both negative and positive facts to be in the same place? To appear in the same clause, sentence, text? Isn't that a contradiction? As an answer to these questions I invite the reader to consider Kant in his discussion of the nature of time: "Time is not a concept, since otherwise it would merely conform to formal logical analysis (and therefore, to the principle of non-contradiction). However, time makes

it possible to deviate from the principle of non-contradiction: indeed, it is possible to say that A and non-A are in the same spatial location if one considers them in different times, and a sufficient alteration between states were to occur" (*Critique of Pure Reason*; A32/B48).

As an example of how negative and positive facts can occur in the same place please consider the Hindu (Sanskrit) expression: "Tat Twam Asi" (You Are That). The expression serves as a starting point, in the Advaita school, for discussing the nature of the Self ("Atman"). In a different school, the Vishishtadvaita, it appears as a negative fact: "Sa atmaa-tat tvam asi" or "Atman, thou art not that." The times of their appearances (as positive and then negative facts) are different (see the *Upanisads* 6.8.7).

1c: "Negate something and observe what you are doing. Do you perhaps inwardly shake your head? And if you do, is this process more deserving of our interest than, say, that of writing a sign of negation in a sentence? Do you now know the *essence* of negation?"

"Negation, one might say, is a gesture of exclusion, of rejection. But such a gesture is used in a great variety of ways!" (Wittgenstein #547-550 *Philosophical Investigations*)

1d. 2. Other facts: These are facts produced (generated) by combining positive and negative facts. They represent, in Peirce's terminology, a process called "thirdness (see #9, 22, 24 below). The effect is essentially to transform the nature of both positive and negative facts, often into something both strange and wonderful. The analogy here can be to a family made up of father, mother, child—where the child represents the new, or later, third thing. These claims presuppose, of course, that one thing, separated from two other things, cannot produce a third thing of a certain quality. Aristotle expresses this idea by saying that "a being who is "self-sufficient is *no* part of a city, and so is *either a beast or a god, not a man*" (*Politics*, 1253a27). Being apart from citizens of a state the self-sufficient person cannot be creative in h/h-self or the source of creativity in others. H/s neither adds anything to the life of the city by his presence nor takes anything away by h/h absence.

2a. Hemingway's story, *Hills like White Elephants* generates its novelty with a thirdness made up of Jig, the American the unborn child.

3. Most persons, I suspect, would agree that positive facts exist. But the case is different with negative facts. Do they, in reality, *exist as* facts? Is there any evidence that they do? Or they simply linguistic forms, "no," "nothing," "loss" and the like that have no referent (unlike positive facts) in extra-linguistic reality?

4 Before going on to present the case for negative facts let me say a word or two about the etymology and uses of "fact" and how this plays into what I will say later in this essay. The word originates, of course, in the Latin "facere" "to do, to act, to make" (infinitive form) and "factum" (past participle) "acted, done, made." I take this to give me warrant to say that "fact" presupposes, in an arrow-of-time fashion, a "before" and an "after. Before something has been "done or made" it was in the process of "doing, making and acting." This suggests, at least to me, that a fact can be seen as the effect of some prior cause, condition or solution to a problem. In this context the problem is essentially that of fictive representation. How can I make the facts of this text (plays, stories, novels, poems) salient? What facts should be included and what facts excluded? How can I make, in Conrad's words the reader "hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see* that—and no more, and it is everything" (*Preface*).

5. Should we then say that a fact, at the "factum" stage, has the feel of embodying a nascent past and fixed and present reality? Facts, negative and positive, are what they are *now* because of what they were in the past. They have a history. But this does not mean that that history will continue in the future. Clearly, what is factual today may not be tomorrow. Slavery of black Africans is no longer a fact in the USA. But slavery was once a positive, but never a negative, fact. Only positive facts change or disappear. Negative facts never change or disappear. Like the presuppositions of a sentence, what makes sentence true, negative facts are "stable" under questions and negation (please see *Wikipedia* entry under "presupposition").

6. If negative and positive facts *show* the effects of some prior cause, condition or problem, then we can also speculate that they both cause and condition, in themselves, other things to be done or made. "I am," Falstaff says, "both witty in myself and a cause of wit in others."

In sum: the way we view time underlies what we mean by "fact." What we sense around us now (apart from hallucinating them) are facts insofar as they are sensed by others. Our children, as well as other living kin, are then a fact. But the unborn, those born after our own personal death, are non-facts, outside of time. But they can become the subject of what philosophers call a "counterfactual thought experiment," of "what if...?"

What if mankind perishes in the next decade (or sooner) because of global warming or some deadly pandemic? What would happen to our values, disvalues and traditions?

7. Two claims that have been made about negative facts are that they exist and that they are more "exhaustive" than positive facts—that is, they are more powerful, and more untamed, than positive facts:

Sorenson prefaces the above by referring to Bertrand Russell's labors to "paraphrase negative true facts as being indirectly about positive facts. But eventually he gave up and admitted that there are negative facts" (226-227). Russell had originally thought, if negative facts could be eliminated, that the world could be described solely using positive facts. But, years later at Harvard University, he forced himself to confess that such an elimination could not be done. The admission nearly caused a riot.

8 The reader will perhaps agree with me, especially if s/h is a writing teacher, that one of the main problems with negative facts is their abundance. One is pulled in two different way. One feels obliged to gather and take into account all relevant materials and perspectives on negative facts. But we are also obliged to render the mass of material into a coherent object of thought and judgment—especially is we are writers and teachers of writing.

9. Once we establish the fact that negative facts exist, or, at a minimum *assume* that they exist, samples of how they appear in texts, how do we go on to demonstrate their uses in writing and reading? When, where and how do we use them in our own storytelling? I suspect that there is no one method that would work in all cases. Nor, in some cases, one that would work for any student or writing teacher. But there is a procedural theory, C. S. Peirce's Theory of Signs (or semantics), to which I invite the reader to give serious thought. Peirce, arguably one of the greatest thinkers in American letters, claimed that "it has never been in my power to study anything, mathematics, ethics, metaphysics, gravitation, thermodynamics, optics, chemistry, comparative anatomy, astronomy, psychology, phonetics, economics, the history of science, whist, men and women, wine metrology, except as a study of semiotic" (*Semiotics and Significs* 85-86).

10. But, before going on to that I would like to bring into the picture a few more perspectives on, and questions about, negative facts—and their interactions with positive facts—all toward the end of being creative.

Do negative facts exist? If so, how, and for what purpose, do they exist? Perhaps Laurence Horn gives the most authoritative, certainly the most comprehensive, account of linguistic negation and arguments *against* the existence of negative facts. After spending 34 (45-79) pages describing



how various groups of thinkers, for example, Parmenides, Plato, Strawson, and Katz, have struggled to eliminate negative facts, Horn grudgingly admits that it cannot be done. Like gravity, taxes or the magnetic field of the earth, they are part of our linguistic descriptions of the world. Horn observes, in passing, that God Himself, in six of the Ten Commandments ("thou shall not...") seems to believe in negative facts.

Horn's summary of failed attempts to eliminate negation and negative facts goes, in part:

We have seen negation survive enough attempts at liquidation—negation as positive difference, negation as incompatibility, negation as dissimilarity, negation as true disbelief, negation as the affirmation of a negative predicate, negation as falsity—to qualify as the Rasputin of the propositional calculus (59).

We can add to this Sigwart's and Gale's statements about the difference between the affirmative predication of a subject and negative predication:

\*Only a *finite* number of predicates can be *affirmed* of every subject, while an *incalculable* number can be *denied* (Sigwart 119; *emph mine*).

\*Every positive fact or event seems to carry on its back an *infinite* number of *negative* fleas (Gale 2; *emph mine*).

11. For an elegant argument for the existence of negative facts and their relationship with positive facts, one should also consult Bjornssan's "If You Believe in Positive Facts, You Should Believe in Negative Facts." Bjornssan's basic claim is that negative facts, along with positive facts, are the "internal" constituents of all objects and their properties. Negative facts "occur no additional cost" in giving an account of objects of and their properties. Moreover, by acknowledging the existence of negative facts, one does not need any "third thing" (which might lead to an infinite regress) to identify how objects stand to "natural or expected properties."

It is important to note here that later on in a discussion of character and h/h textual context that negative facts have "causal efficacy." The lack of certain expected properties, in short, causes things to happen in storytelling: "We think that people die from *lack* of oxygen, that they have accidents caused by *inattention*, and that they *fail* an exam for *lack* of sleep (Bjornssan 18; *emph mine*).

12. What motivates a storyteller? Is it, as Horace observes, a combination of giving instruction (*utile*) and pleasure (*dulce*) to the reader or listener? Or is there, from the writer/speaker's perspective, a monetary motive or desire for fame? In all this, it seems fair to say, there is the need to avoid failure. But with the proliferation of creative writing course, and the

subsequent increase in submissions for publication, since World War II, there are far more failures than successes. *The Sewanee Review*, for example, publishes, on the average, two out of every 234 submissions. With other publications the submission to publishing rate is even disparate (McGurl 33-37).

If you believe in IW, then you believe in negative facts. They are as much, sometimes more, the stuff of stories as positive facts. One purpose here is to suggest ways negative and positive facts must interact in telling a story that not only makes sense, but makes a story *interesting*. Taking "lost" as a negative fact we find a prominent literary critic writing:

13. Are representations of things missing, or absences, sometimes (most of the time?) more interesting than things present? For an image of an absence, see Georges Léonnec's picture of a family looking at a nail where the Mona Lisa had hung in the Louvre. A museum guard gestures at the nail. Recall that the Mona Lisa went missing, for two years, in 1911. One can view the picture at:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=Georges%20L%C3%A9onnec&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox->

a&channel=np&source=hp or (in larger scale) or in the *TLS*, September 6, 2013: 24.

In the foreword to his book Gekoski tells the story of Kafka and Max Brod's visit to the Louvre in 1911. The pair traveled from Milan to Paris and had joined a crowd squeezed in a room containing the Mona Lisa. With great effort they pushed their way to where the painting had hung. They had not come to see the painting. They had come to *see its absence*. The painting had been stolen a week earlier.



"There is, after all, something wearying predictable and banal, about knowing things" Gekoski says (13)—I would add being in the presence of something for a certain amount of time.

On the subject of Kafka and negative facts please consider a characterization of himself as a writer of the "negative element of his age":

14. If trained in a certain way, one might see this essay as (perhaps loosely) belonging to a class of studies Aristotle calls "the need to know," Brandom "making things explicit" and C. S. Pierce "How to make our thoughts clear." Each of these thinkers attempts to answer the question, "why is a human need to make things more explicit and more clear and how do they go about meeting this need?" Here my question, one seeking a more modest answer, is why do we need negative facts in order to create stories, especially *interesting* ones? Why not just rely on positive facts? A quick, and incomplete, answer is that without negative facts there would be no drama, novelty, mystery or closure in our stories.

It seems fair to say then no story, or even the possibility of one, can composed entirely of positive facts. But with characters like God (Milton's *Paradise Lost*) or Swift's Houyhnhnms there seems to be hints at what a perfectly positive character might look

like. But even this is questionable. How do Milton and Swift describe these characters? By using negative facts of course—by what properties they lack as much as by what they have.

Paradoxes are examples of these effects. Here are a few as Zen Koans:

1. Shuzan held out his short staff and said: 'If you call this a short staff, you *oppose* its reality. If you do *not* call it a short staff, you *ignore* the fact. Now what do you wish to call this"?

Commentary by a Zen Master:

Holding out the short staff/He gave an order of life or death  
*Positive and negative interwoven.*

2. Joshu asked the teacher Nansen. 'What is the true way?'  
Nansen answered, 'Everyday way is the true way.' Joshu asked, 'Can I study it'? Nansen said, 'The more you study the *further* from the Way.' Joshu replied, 'If I *don't* study it, how can I know it'? Nansen answered, 'The Way does *not* belong to things seen *nor* to things *unseen*. It does *not* belong to things known, *nor* to thing *unknown*.

Do *not* seek it, study, or name it. To find yourself on it, open yourself wide as the sky.

3. A surefire cure for the hiccups: 'Run around the house three

times *without* thinking of the word 'wolf.' "" (Hofstadter 252-254).

15. Counterfactual Thought-Experiment: In an attempt to understand the significance of something philosophers often engage in a counterfactual thought-experiment. With this one imagines the *absence* of the something: what if, for example, computers had been invented and used? What would have changed? Or, take the thought experiment of Samuel Scheffler, he imagines the annihilation of the human race after our own personal death (*Death and the Afterlife*). How would this affect our behavior, thinking, emotions?

16. There is, as far as I know, no way to define, or strictly classify, absences. But there is perhaps, a way to exemplify them—in such a way as to make them useful. Let me suggest we seriously consider Wittgenstein's "family-resemblance" (*Familienähnlichkeit*) account of words. Instead of generalizing about alleged foundational units of words, he claims that 'family resemblance' is a more suitable analogy for the means of connecting particular uses of the same word. There is no reason to look, as we have done traditionally—and dogmatically—for one, essential core in which the meaning of a word is located and which is, therefore, common to all uses of that word. We should, instead, travel with the word's uses through “a

complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing”  
(*Philosophical Investigations* #66). Family resemblance also serves to exhibit the lack of boundaries and the distance from exactness that that all words exhibit.

With this we have warrant to say that words that presuppose things not seen or heard, things that lack some natural or expected property, give us information about negative facts. Sartre phrases this in terms of our expectations: "It is evident that non-being always appears within the limits of a human expectation" (7).

Common words here include "lost" (unable to find one's way), "failure" (lack of success), "forget" (un-remembering), "absence" (out of sight and hearing), "lying" (absence of truth). In addition to these nominal forms ("nothingness" and "nothing" would be included here) are the negative forming affixes like "un-", "-less" and "dis-" ones capable of transforming a positive fact into a negative one.

17. Empty space as punctuation: Examples here include ..., \*\*\*, —, white spaces (in a text), a blank page, as in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Ellipses occur often in Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* and *Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*. *Ellipsis* is the name of a literary magazine published by Westminster College, Salt Lake City, Utah. A particularly interest example of \*\*\* is the



F\*\*\* word. In the August 30, 2013 edition of the *TLS* (p. 28) there is a longish discussion of the publication history of the word. Here we are referred, among other things, to Rufus Lodge's study, *F\*\*k: An irreverent history of the F-word* (The Friday Project).

Is, then, our expectation of what should and can be *there*, but is missing, a suitable working definition of negative information. Perhaps.

18. Alan Turing: Turing is commemorated in Manchester's Sackville Gardens, UK, as "father of Computer Science, Mathematician, Logician, Wartime Code-breaker, Victim of Prejudice." Turing's *negative theorem*—that some functions are uncomputable—entails that certain behaviors would be scientifically inexplicable if they were ever to occur. Some behaviors would be inexplicable, not because they would be absolutely impossible, but because they would take more time than our 14 billion-year-old universe can accommodate (Please see Leslie Valiant, *Probably Approximately Correct: Nature's algorithms for learning and prospering in a complex world* (UK: Basic Books 2013)).

Is this the case with the struggle in IW between absence and presence? To view this more clearly one has to think of "struggle" as an inexplicable behavior.

19. It seems prudent to remind the reader that IW is a literary artifact.

Telling, writing or listening to a story is a phenomenon of processing linguistic data within an interpretative framework. Thus, it is worthwhile to examine how IW create points of emphasis and importance through precise patterns in their grammatical structure. Here the interpretative framework is the "entanglement" of absence and presence as they are expressed in language. This presupposes that "negative" and "positive" can be taken simply as words that create meaning by forming relationships and patterns with other words—but do not necessarily refer to extra-textual items, events, things, whatever.

I will, therefore, have nothing to say here about the age-old controversy of the supposed relationship between "verba" (words) and "res" (things) (See Howell: 238-245). Are there both absences and presences in nature? Or only presences? Is nature, or any of its properties, a fact? Or perhaps a "condition":

"In the world of nature, there are no negative conditions, but only positive conditions. The only way whereby one can *not be* in one place is for one to *be* at some other place" (Burke 295).

20. Dark energy: Since we are concerned here with the transactions between presence and absence in IW is there anything (in heaven or on earth) that

might serve us as a controlling analogy for such transactions.? Let us pause for a moment and consider what physicists call "dark energy." Statements by the Nobel Laureate in physics, Steven Weinberg, give us some hints (86-87). In summary form, A *as* B, these statements go:

1. Take a story *as* cosmologists used to take the "speed" of the universe and as they take it now. "It had been naturally supposed that the expansion of the universe was slowing down, due to the gravitational attraction of the galaxies for each other, just as a stone thrown upward slows its rise under the influence of the earth's gravity... in 1998 two astronomers showed that the universe is not slowing down at all but *speeding up*."

2. The cause of the speeding up of the universe is dark energy. It is producing "a sort of antigravity pushing the galaxies apart."

3. Is this something like what absences "do" to presences in IW? If this analogy holds, then what IW should we give to this "pushing apart" and the "war" between gravity and antigravity?

If any given IW can be said to contain both gravitational (present) and antigravitational (absence) forces, then it seems fair to ask "what is happening in the space between them"? As one possible answer to that let me turn this discussion over to my lord the second Earl of Rochester (John

Wilmot) and the poem "Upon Nothing" (1689). I quote here only portions of it:

*Nothing!* thou Elder Brother ev'n to Shade,  
That hadst a Being ere the World was made,  
And (well fixt) art alone, of Ending not afraid.

Great Negative! how vainly would the Wise  
Enquire, define, distinguish, teach, devise,  
Didst thou not stand to point their dull philosophies?

*Is*, or *is not*, the Two great Ends of Fate,  
And, true or false, the Subject of Debate,  
That perfect or destroy the vast Designs of Fate;

When they have rack'd the Politician's Breast,  
Within thy Bosom most securely rest,  
And, when reduced to thee, are least unsafe and best?

Three salient issues emerge here from the space between absence and presence. One, of course, is linear time. Nothing precedes something—the story of *Genesis* comes to mind. A second one is the absence formed as the

telling of lies, especially by politicians. The third one is the linguistic, and epistemological, dualism of "is" and "is not." This last has perhaps the most comprehensive reach in human affairs. What is the truth, what not? What to do next, what not—in short, Hamlet's dilemma.

21. No doubt the reader possesses a lot of knowledge about how lying can propel IW. Or how the absence of lies, at certain times and places, can cause IW to go flat. I think particularly of TV series, for example, "House of Cards" and "Breaking Bad" and characters like Iago, Machiavelli's prince, the lying informants of Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

22. An issue some readers might want to engage in (one anticipated in Aristotle's account of privation) is the possible existence of absence as the *end, or annihilation, of all* presence: Sorenson's representation (above) of negation as being "exhaustive" of positive information is one example. But what about presences in the universe vanishing? Should we then call this state an absence? Certainly scientists, and other thinkers, tell us that the end of the universe has a high probability of happening:

\*"The vast majority of the universe is empty. And empty space is silent. As Cage (another scholar) grew older, he expressed optimism about the future of music. He took solace in the conviction that there will always

be sound. But given high standard, 'always' means every time. The laws of thermodynamics doom the universe to heat death. Everything, everywhere, will end in silence" (Sorenson 290).

The universe, in short, is going to end in a giant absence.

\*Near the end of 'The Tempest.'..Prospero breaks his staff and declares,'Our revels now are ended. These our actors, as I foretold you, were all spirits and are melted into air, into thin air.' The latest word from physics is that something like that ending may be in store for the universe. In this case, the role of Prospero is played by the Higgs field, an invisible ocean of energy that permeates space (Overbye D1, D3).

23. This "not all" constraint will be an important part of what I have to say later about the creative power of absence in IW. Added to this is the stress Peirce's theory puts on causation, how absence-biased words, their object and interpretation exist in a web of cause and effect.

24. Just as the "not all" constraint applies to absence and its effect, so does the constraint apply to what's going on here. There are not enough thought-runs in heaven or on earth to explain completely how absence figures in IW. But as Pushkin observes about loving women, "you can love them all, but at least you must try."

24a. So let us try, following the three-part scheme of Peirce, to identify how absence go toward creating character, plot, and endings in IW.

(Other uses of absence, ones that commonly appear in IW, are the subject of a larger study).

24b."Character," as we all perhaps know, comes from the Greek *character* ("engraved"; "marked") through the Latin "an engraving instrument." The *OED* lists 17 different varieties, and projections, of this "engraved" core meaning. Most literary scholars, as we might expect, commonly use this meaning of the word as a starting point for their answer to "what is character?" (For example, Burke; Livingston; McGovern; see also *Wikipedia* and *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entries under "Character").

None, however, focuses on absence as part of the distinguishing marks of a character. (Indeed it seems fair to say most critics would answer, if asked, that such facts do not exist.). In the process of creating stories, as I hope from what has gone before here demonstrates, positive and absence, cooperate with each other. If you use positive facts to tell your IW, then you must also use negative ones. If a character composed completely of negative could exist (it cannot), then the very possibility of telling a story could not exist.

Now please recall that absence have causation efficacy. Because of what they are, they cause other things to happen—because we are deaf, we cannot hear; because we cannot hear, we have a different relationship with the un-deaf. In the Peircean theory of signs, this appears as a two-way cause and effect between the negative biased-word, the object, and our interpretation of the object, specifically, the storyteller's motive with it.

Peirce, a professed Aristotelian, borrows heavily from the philosopher's account of "privation" (*steresis*). The "not all" constraint (discussed above) of signs is an obvious borrowing. A road sign cannot "tell" the traveler everything about the road. Smoke cannot represent everything about the fire. In Aristotle, this "not all" takes the form of change in a object. Objects change their properties because of their potentiality, the capacity to become something different. Whatever is alive has the potential to die. One may exhibit signs of dying, but the signs, in themselves, cannot tell us *all* the causes for dying.

Peirce does not relate an object's potentiality to character. But I would argue that it is a vital part of creating a character. And it would add that absence are a crucial kind of potentiality.

25. The presence of an absence. Most Hemingway scholars say that the dialogue between Jig and the American ("Hills Like White Elephants")



concerns Jig's unborn child. In the story, we remember, the unborn child is an "it." It lacks a name, a specific gender, weight and so on. Yet it plays an important role in the role. It become, in Peircean terms, a "sign" of the relationship between the American and Jig. Hemingway has, in effect, imbued the child with a stronger causal efficacy than either one of the two other characters.

Homer tells us that Odysseus is absent from Ithaca for almost 20 years. Does this make a difference in what is present at Ithaca? Of course. Suitors gather around Penelope. She weaves and unweaves a "web." Argos, Odysseus' hunting dog, abandoned, is misused and mistreated. Can we then say that Odysseus' absence causes things to happen that would not have happened had he stayed at home? Had he been present? Certainly Odysseus' presence at Ithaca could have caused things to happen there. But they would have been different from what happened during his absence.

Absence and presence then cause *different* things to happen and for them to take a textual representation. But why does Homer *seem* to put more weight on Odysseus' absence than his presence in Ithaca? I suggest it opens up a space of what can be called in-betweenness, the space occupied by Odysseus' journey (and the events therein) between Ithaca and the Trojan war. Please think of what happens in this "space." There is not only the

journey (and its dangers) home, but also the encounters, among others, with Circe, the Lotus Eaters, Aeolus and the Cyclops.

26. Dark Energy: According to the Nobel Laureate in physics, Steven Weinberg, dark energy comprises "three-quarters of the total energy in the universe."

27. Implication. A sentence can say (sometimes more) by what it implies as what it boldly states.

28. Aristotle, according to Ross, suggests that "negation is not the rejection of a previous affirmation, negation is the rejection (and affirmation the acceptance) of a suggested connection" (see *Metaphysics* 1017: 3a). On this reading we might want to say that Homer intends for the reader to see Odysseus' long absence as the break between his private (Ithaca) and public (Troy) life—as a family man and as a warrior. Unlike any other character in the story, Odysseus lives in, and journeys between, two different realms of existence. What if Odysseus had not gone off to Troy?

29. Kafka's "Metamorphosis," recall, Gregor Samsa develops as a character by having (certain normal human properties) to lacking them, into a state of double negation, a "nothing, nothing" ("ungeheures Ungeziefer"), and finally death and silence.

29a. Here absence destroys a possible presence. Does this mean that every paradox involve absences? Of course. But paradoxes must also bring absences into contact with present conditions. There must be a transaction between them. The transaction is recursive. Recursive lies, in this case, in the capacity of language to destroy, or at least "abuse," itself.

30. Irony and absence.

"Irony [is] the infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not. The irony established nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it.... Irony is a qualification of subjectivity. In irony, the subject is negatively free, since the actuality that is supposed to give the subject content is not there. He is free from the constraint in which the given actuality holds the subject, but he is negatively free and as such is suspended, because there is nothing that holds him. But this very freedom, this suspension, gives the ironist a certain enthusiasm, because he becomes intoxicated, so to speak, in the infinity of possibilities.... But if irony is a qualification of subjectivity, then it must manifest itself the first time subjectivity makes its appearance in world history. Irony is, namely, the first and most abstract qualification of subjectivity. This points

to the historical turning point where subjectivity made its appearance for the first time, and with this we have come to Socrates.... For him, the whole given actuality had entirely lost its validity; he had become alien to the actuality of the whole substantial world. This is one side of irony, but on the other hand he used irony as he destroyed Greek culture. His conduct toward it was at all times ironic; he was ignorant and knew nothing but was continually seeking information from others; yet as he let the existing go on existing, it foundered. He kept on using this tactic until the very last, as was especially evident when he was accused. But his fervor in this service consumed him, and in the end irony overwhelmed; he became dizzy, and everything lost its reality" (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*).

31. *Vulgus vult decipi*. "The people like to be deceived." Truth and lying. In theory, telling the truth would mean, minimally, telling what things really are. Lying, by contrast, telling what things are really not. (This is called, after Aristotle, the correspondence theory of truth; see also John Caputo: *Truth*; Simon Blackburn's *Truth, a Guide for the Perplexed*; Bernard Williams *Truth and Truthfulness*). Here, obviously, the relationship between the language we use and what it refers to is crucial. If we say "I saw a unicorn in my garden last week," we make the claim that unicorns exist, are "real."

"wolf" one informs the one with the hiccups not to think of the word "wolf."  
The speaker says to the listener not to say "wolf." Only if the listener is stone-deaf does h/s not hear the word "wolf." This, of course, would make it impossible for h/h to cure the hiccups. A cure is additionally impossible if h/s hears and consequently thinks, "wolf."

31a. Please consider the case of Cinderella. First, being an interesting IW, it has lasted a long time and told and re-told in many different languages. Secondly, by taking salient part of it, character (or agent), class, locations and so on, one can allow it to represent these parts in any other actual and possible IW. Thirdly, its infrastructure is essentially a web of interactions between absence and presence. An approach to such interactions is by way of Bjornssons' "fact/object/property" triad and Aristotle's account of "privation."

Anyone who thinks that there are positive facts constituted by objects and properties and who takes objects and properties seriously will allow that not *all* objects have *all* properties. objects differ with respect to what properties they have, and properties differ with respect to the objects that have them. That is the very reason to take fact-object-property ontology seriously (Bjornsson 8).

Please notice here that Bjornsson mainly speaks about "difference," object a may differ from object b, property c from property d, and so on. Or, to put it another way, object a may either *have* (positive fact) or *lack* (negative fact) property a, b and so on. What neither object can have or lack are *all* properties. Cinderella, taken as a object, cannot have all the properties of a servant or princess. To go to the ball we must *lack* some of the properties of a servant (her costuming, hair style, mode of transportation etc.) *take on* other properties of a princess. The linear movement in time of the story is from lacking to having, absence to presence.

31a. Does IW mean the "bewitching of our intelligence by means of our language"; *Philosophical Investigations #109*).

32. Adjectives and Absence: The well-known poet and classical scholar, Anne Carson, has this say about the nature and function of adjectives: "What is an adjective? Nouns name the world. Verbs activate names. Adjectives come from somewhere else. The word *adjective* (*epitheton* in Greek) is itself an adjective meaning "placed on top," "added," "appended," "imported," "foreign." Adjectives seem fairly innocent additions but look again. These small important mechanisms are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place of particularity. They are the latches of being" (*Autobiography of Red*).

From this description we can infer that adjectives have the power to alter the gaze of the reader. To attach an adjective to a noun is to direct the gaze "down" to a specific location in being. To remove an adjective from a noun (or leave the noun without an adjective) is to direct the reader's gaze upwards. We might otherwise refer to these effects of the gravitational pull of nouns. With adjectives one, in general, increases the pull; by withholding adjectives decreases it. Later in her book Carson says this is essentially what the Greek poet, Stesichoros, does. The lightness of his verses are, she says, a result of leaving many (not all) nouns "unadjectived." Many Romantic poets, we notice, similar leave many nouns unadjectived to create an atmosphere of lightness, lift, a "near to heaven" tone. One thinks here, for example, of Shelley's *To a Skylark* and Keats' *Ode to Autumn*.

I would add that what is true of adjectives, in the Carsonian sense, is also true of adverbs. Some increase the "weight" of verbs; others decrease, even, free them from weight.

Many adjectives and adverbs are absence-biassed: "merciless/mercilessly," "restless/restlessly," "unfeeling/unfeelingly" and they, in combination with presence-biased adjectives and adverbs, can create a heavy, somber, atmosphere: Please take note of Conrad's description of a ship in a storm: "The ship began to dip into a southwest swell, and the softly

luminous sky of *low* latitudes took on a harder sheen from day to day above our heads: it arched high above the ship vibrating and *pale*, like an immense dome of steel, resonant with the *deep* voice of freshening gales. The sunshine gleamed *cold* on the white curls of *black* waves. Before the strong breath of westerly squalls the ship, with reduced sail, *lay slowly over*, obstinate and yielding. She drove to and fro in the *unceasing* endeavour to fight her way through the *invisible* violence of the winds: she pitched headlong into *dark* smooth hollows; she *struggled* upwards over the snowy ridges of great running seas; she rolled, *restless*, from side to side, like a thing in pain. Enduring and valiant, she answered to the call of men; and her slim spars waving for ever in abrupt semicircles, seemed to beckon in vain for help towards the stormy sky... Sails blew *adrift*. Things broke loose. *Cold and wet*, we were washed about the deck while trying to repair damages. The ship tossed about, shaken furiously, like a toy in the hand of a lunatic. Just at sunset there was a rush to shorten sail before the menace of a *sombre* hail cloud. The hard gust of wind came brutal like the blow of a fist. The ship relieved of her canvas in time received it pluckily: she yielded reluctantly to the *violent* onset; then coming up with a stately and irresistible motion, brought her spars to windward in the teeth of the screeching squall. Out of the *abysmal darkness* of the *black cloud* overhead white hail



streamed on her, rattled on the rigging, leaped in handfuls off the yards, rebounded on the deck—round and gleaming in the *murky* turmoil like a shower of pearls. It passed away. For a moment a livid sun shot horizontally the last rays of sinister light between the hills of steep, rolling waves. Then a wild night rushed in—stamped out in a great howl that *dismal remnant* of a stormy day.

There was no sleep on board that night. Most seamen remember in their life one or two such nights of a culminating gale. Nothing seems left of the whole universe but *darkness, clamour, fury*—and the ship. And like the last vestige of a *shattered* creation she drifts, bearing an *anguished remnant* of sinful mankind, through the distress, tumult, and pain of an *avenging* terror. No one slept in the forecastle.

Please notice, by the criteria of Aristotle's "privation" one easily creates absence-biassed adjectives and adverbs by subtracting, or adding, certain qualities from or to presences:

Subtract light and you can get "dark," "murky," "somber," etc.

Subtract heat and you get "cold," "freeze,"

Add water ( some other liquid) and you get "wet."

33. Value and the struggle between presence and absence. As an example  
lease take Gresham Law. In short form the law says that "bad money will  
drive out good money.

"Good" money is money that shows little difference between its  
nominal value (the face value of the coin) and its commodity value (the  
value of the metal of which it is made, often other precious metals, nickel or  
copper). On the other hand, "bad" money is money that has a commodity  
value considerably lower than its face value and is in circulation along with  
good money, where both forms are required to be accepted at equal value as  
legal tender. In the market for used cars (lemon automobiles) (analogous to  
bad currency) will drive out the good cars. The problem is one of asymmetry  
of information. Sellers have a strong financial incentive to pass all used cars  
off as "good" cars, especially lemons. This makes it difficult to buy a good  
car at a fair price, as the buyer risks overpaying for a lemon. The result is  
that buyers will only pay the fair price of a lemon, so at least they reduce the  
risk of overpaying. High-quality cars tend to be pushed out of the market,  
because there is no good way to establish that they really are worth more.  
Certified pre-owned programs are an attempt to mitigate this problem by  
providing a warranty and other guarantees of quality. 'The Market for  
Lemons' is a work that examines this problem in more detail. Some also use

an explanation of Gresham's Law as 'The more efficient you become, the less effective you get'; i.e. 'when you try to go on the cheap, you will stop selling' or 'the less you invest in your non-tangible services, the fewer sales you will get.' (*Wikipedia* "Gresham's Law").

The course our city runs is the same towards men and money.

She has true and worthy sons.

She has fine new gold and ancient silver,

Coins untouched with alloys, gold or silver,

Each well minted, tested each and ringing clear.

Yet we never use them!

Others pass from hand to hand,

Sorry brass just struck last week and branded with a wretched brand.

So with men we know for upright, blameless lives and noble names.

These we spurn for men of brass.

### Part Three

THE OTHER.

The most widely used, questioned and imagined Other in IW is death. It occurs in many forms. Below I discuss it in two forms, "the death of the other" and "my death."

1. The other can be either a constant (everywhere necessary in IW) or a variable, something that can exit, and enter, IW without destroying the reader's interest in IW or otherwise tweaking h/ imagination.
2. The family of other contains three members salient in this essay:
  - a. The other as presence. The highest ontological, and semantic, status.
  - b. The other as an absent presence. Godot in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; Jig's unborn child in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"; Semantic status but with a problematic ontological status. "Is the 'it,' constantly mentioned in the story actually an unborn child?"
  - c. The other as an future possibility. Only semantic status. No ontological status.
  - d. The ontological status of the other can be both animate and inanimate.
    - d1. Person is the most salient animate other.
  - e. An other plays the role of a variable by exiting and entering the scene.
  - f. The "I" of first person narrative, due to the self-refleciteveness can be an other.
  - g. As long as the reader is present, h/s is a constant.

- h. The critic, translator, publisher of IW are always variables.
- i. An other can be animate or inanimate.
- j. Only an animate other, especially persons, have both an objective and objective presence and absence.

Some salient objective properties include size, shape, nationality, language.

Subjective properties include: emotions, compassion, apathy, conscience, and so on. intuition.

- k. The strangeness and de-familiarizing of the other. "All of literature is nothing other than the practice of making things *strange*, of making the reader see what would otherwise remain obscure or *natural*. The proper field of study (of IW) is not the writer's biography, or h/h historical situation, or hhe personal habits" (Passage linguistically slightly altered from Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*. Tr. Gerald Bruns).

What makes the other strange? The short answer is a heavy use of absences, the lack of properties (objective and subjective) that might be there. Important here, for persons, are lack of a proper name, the unintelligibility of h/h language, h/h appearance, the way h/s arrives in the scene and so on. When Odysseus arrives at home dressed as a beggar, Penelope asks him, "Who are you, and where do you come from? What is your city, and who are

your parents?" (*Odyssey 19*; A. S Kline translation) This series of questions is repeated, in exact order five other times by different persons he encounters on his way back to Ithaca.

Strangeness, the result of absences, provokes more questions than presence as familiarity

In this light please think of Gulliver, Candide,

2a: Each variable is an Other/Another to the reader of IW

2a1. Each variable is an Other/Another to a constant (or constants) in TW.

Example: In Hubert Mingarelli's *A Feast in Winter*, the constants are:

Space: Poland.

Time: 1941.

Person: The "I," Bauer, Emmerich, Emmerich's son, a Pole and his dog, the Jew.

Others: Each person is other/another to each of the others.

Casualty: Otherness takes the form of different languages, different culture, different ideologies and so on of the persons. The "I," Bauer and Emmerich are German soldiers assigned to hunt down and kill Jews.

This is their "work."

Variables: Absence, as cause, precedes presence as effect to create the plot. Emmerich's talk of his absent (at home) son, for example, sets up

compassion for him in his comrades. The absence of food, warmth, shelter fuel the dialogue.

3. Death to another is always other to me.

3a. My own death is other only to others.

3b. The moment of my own death is never other to me.

3c. My moment of my own death is neither a presence nor an absence to me.

3d. My death is both a presence and an absence to others. (For more details see part 3).

4. Shadows appears as others.

Each substance of a grief hath twenty *shadows*,  
Which shows like grief itself, but is not so;  
For sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears,  
Divides one thing entire to many objects;  
Like perspectives, which rightly gazed upon  
Show nothing but confusion, eyed awry  
Distinguish form: so your sweet majesty,  
Looking awry upon your lord's departure,  
Find shapes of grief, more than himself, to wail;

Which, look'd on as it is, is nought but *shadows*

Of what it is not. (*Richard 2: II ii*)<sup>v</sup>

\* It was late and every one had left the café except an old man who sat in the *shadow* the leaves of the tree made against the electric light (Hemingway, "A Clean Well-Lighted Place").

\* The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. on this side there was no *shade* and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the *sun*. Close against the side of the station there was the warm *shadow* of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies. The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the *shade*. (Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants")

\* Between the idea/And the reality/*Between* the motion/And the act/Falls the *shadow* (T. S. Eliot "The Hollow Men).

4a. My shadow is other to me and others:

A Lecture upon the Shadow

Stand still, and I will read to thee

A lecture, love, in love's philosophy.



These three hours that we have spent,  
Walking here, two shadows went  
Along with us, which we ourselves produc'd.  
But, now the sun is just above our head,  
We do those shadows tread,  
And to brave clearness all things are reduc'd.  
So whilst our infant loves did grow,  
Disguises did, and shadows, flow  
From us, and our cares; but now 'tis not so.  
That love has not attain'd the high'st degree,  
Which is still diligent lest others see.  
(John Donne).

5. Death as Other. Before I begin a discussion of what philosophers have said about death you might want to read IW representations like Swift's "Verses On The Death of Doctor Swift," Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Willa Cathers *Death Comes to the Archbishop*; the Medieval morality play, *Everyman* and Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*.

5a. Death of the Other. It seems quite plain that human beings not infrequently imagine and conceive of their own deaths without the least

difficulty. Why else would they take out life insurance or admonish themselves to drive more carefully.

5b. "When I die, writes Bertrand Russell in 'What I believe,' I shall rot and nothing of my ego will survive."

It is surely this that people wish to avoid or put off. A person thinking of his own death is thinking of the destruction or disintegration of his body and the cessation of his experiences.

5c. Death and Spectatorship. But can we imagine our own death. Is it true a person, no matter how hard h/s tries, conceive of h/h cessation. "Whenever we make the attempt to imagine our death, says Freud, " we can, on reflection, perceive that we really survive as spectators."

Thinking of oneself as spectator does not imply that one is thinking of oneself as not dead.

5d. Thinking as a condition for knowing death. It is a trivial fact that a person must be alive in order to think of anything at all. H/h thinking must take place at some moment and must be conducted by means of symbols of some kind. But nothing follows from this about the contents of h/h thoughts. We don't normally think about the moment we are thinking about death or the symbols we are using to think.

Take this example. It is now 7.37 A. M. 14 April 2014 and I am wondering when the window washer will come. My thought here is clearly not about the moment at which I am thinking it or about the fact that I am employing certain English words. Also, the fact that I must be alive in order to think about my death does not mean that my continued existence is part of the content of my thoughts. My present or future thoughts are not the subject matter of my thoughts.

5e. "Our death is generically different from the death of others". Here we seem to see an ambiguity in the word "death." When we think of the death of another we eliminate 'an object in the world' without at the same time eliminating 'the observing ego or subject.' If h/s examines closely what they mean by the death of others h/s recognizes that they *themselves are still in the picture*. They are the observer contemplating the scene, even if the scene may be only in their imagination. Death is an event within the world while the life-world of IW lasts (Peter Koestenbaum, "The Vitality of Death" 141; see also P. L Landsberg, *The Experience of Death*).

5f. My death is best described as a "void" or Nothingness.

5g. My death means the annihilation of the universe.

5h. It is bad reasoning to make a transition from "my universe" to "the universe." If I die, it does not necessarily mean the end of anything or the universe. This is a case of being bewitched by language.

5i. In thinking of our own death we not suppose the universe is going to come to an end also. For example, people who envy the young because they have many years ahead of them certainly do not suppose that the universe will be annihilated when people make wills or writers of IWs who have literary executors.

6. Should we look in the eyes of those about to die? Here is a passage from Mingarelli's *A Meal in Winter*. The narrative switches between the "now" and a past "then." Please pay attention to "eyes," "looking" and the oscillation between presence (what is there) and absence (what is not):

"If I'd lifted my eyes to the horizon...I would have seen Emmerich (a fellow soldier) looking even older than he did now. He was leaning against the pillar of the bridge. The only courage Bauer (another soldier). And I managed was I not turning out eyes away while he panted and spat. But we did not have the courage to touch him or talk to him. A mild Spring rain had begun to fall. Two grey curtains it made on either side of Us closed us in with Emmerich, with his new dead body. Bauer looked At me and I looked at him because we could no longer look at Emmerich

And all the blood he was losing" (31).

6a. Suicide and the other. Suicide is taking the self as the other, much like a soldier takes the enemy. In the act the self feels the need of absence as a way of surviving.

6b. Statements about death generated by combining presence with absence.

Note especially the heavy use of absence as the dark star principle in #c.

a. Animals have these advantages over man: they never hear the clock strike, they die without any idea of death, they have no theologians to instruct them, Their last moments are not disturbed by unwelcome and unpleasant ceremonies, their funerals cost them nothing, and no one starts lawsuits over their wills.

-Voltaire.

b. All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses. To die is different from what any one supposed and luckier. -Walt Whitman.

c. I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.

Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.

In time the curtain-edges will grow light.

Till then I see what's really always there:

Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,

Making all thought impossible but how

And where and when I shall myself die.

Arid interrogation: yet the dread  
Of dying, and being dead,  
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse  
—The good not done, the love not given, time  
Torn off unused—nor wretchedly because  
An only life can take so long to climb  
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;  
But at the total emptiness for ever,  
The sure extinction that we travel to  
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,  
Not to be anywhere,  
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid  
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade  
Created to pretend we never die,  
And specious stuff that says *No rational being  
Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing  
That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,  
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,  
Nothing to love or link with,  
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,  
A small unfocused blur, a standing chill  
That slows each impulse down to indecision.  
Most things may never happen: this one will,  
And realisation of it rages out  
In furnace-fear when we are caught without  
People or drink. Courage is no good:  
It means not scaring others. Being brave  
Lets no one off the grave.  
Death is no different whined at than withstood.

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.  
It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,  
Have always known, know that we can't escape,  
Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.  
Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring  
In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring  
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.  
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.  
Work has to be done.  
Postmen like doctors go from house to house.  
-Philip Larkin, "Aubade"

## 7. The Absent Character:

## A CLOUD OF INATTENTION

Homer, my friend who promised to write the story of my life, has died. A great loss! Not only to me and his other friends, but also to the world of letters. Why? Because Homer's words about me (he was a very famous author) would have invariably reached very large, and extremely discriminating, audience. I would have become, if not famous, at least noticed. But now, forced to finish what Homer started and to tell my own story, I'm certainly doomed to remain what I have always been: the least important character in fiction. A cloud of inattention, which has always surrounded me, is bound to become even thicker.

I am the exact opposite of what I wanted to be. I came into the world with the firm purpose of being known and I have failed completely. I have developed into a totally obscure character. It's not that I haven't tried being noticed. I have. But everyone, authors and other characters alike, ignore me. The other day I was in this café where authors go to find characters for their fiction and I met a famous author. I bought him a coffee and a Danish and, in order to make him remember me, I stared hard into his face, shook his hand violently and yelled at him, "It's great to finally meet you! You're my favorite author!" Then I slipped my name and address into his hand. What happened next was completely contrary to what I wanted. He turned away



from me and started talking with another famous author about how hard it is nowadays to find suitable fictional characters. He had become totally oblivious of me!

The next day I was back in the café and tried, with another famous author, a different kind of introduction. Instead of approaching him from a standing position, I remained seated. And, instead of adopting a bold, forward, manner I put on an air of indifference and what might be called an extreme Byronic pose. My demeanor and handshake were totally consistent with that of the celebrated poet: languid, retreating, leaving in their wake the atmospheric suggestion of a mysterious past. The reaction of the famous author? After looking blankly through me, he turned and walked over to talk with a character who had appeared in his recent bestseller.

So, on the advice of a friend, another obscure character, I started frequenting a café for bad writers. Perhaps, I told myself, this café was just what I needed to become known. Here writers came to find some good secondhand bargains and also some good, cheap, new material. And, since literary fashion always changes with the times (and economic fluctuations) writers had a reasonable hope of meeting characters who had once been famous but now were unemployed. The first day I was in the café I remembered meeting characters who had worked for Nobel Prize winners.

But now, out of work for some time, they were hungry and in need of rent money.

On this particular day, I was sitting in the café with a second, or third, rate (I forget which) writer discussing character-identity and fiction writing.

“Why not make me a character in your next book?” I asked.

“So what are your qualifications for being a character in my kind of book?”

“I have a totally blank personality. No one ever notices me. Dogs never bark at me. Beggars look right through me. I’m perfect for contemporary fiction.” I could see, through the heavy cigarette smoke, that he might be beginning to take interest in me. But then a surprise!

“You might do, if the price is right. I’m not sure. Right now I’m thinking about renting a cheap, second-hand character for my next big book.”

I, of course, knew about agencies that rent out characters. Several discount agencies I had approached about employment had rejected my job application. All of them gave me the same story—with words of dismissal like “too two dimensional;” “totally lacking in personal qualities”; or, the

most cutting of all, “After several in-house discussions about your application, we have concluded that you don’t exist.”

“My book is very much mainstream. It’s about anonymity and evil in the big city. So the character has to be just right,” the writer added.

“I’m your guy,” I said. “Anonymity...a piece of cake.”

“Well,” he replied, “send me your resume. I’ll take a look at it.”

Days, weeks and months passed. Spring turned into summer, summer into fall and then winter came. Nothing. Not a word from the second (or third?) rate author. So here I’m in another café, one patronized by fictional stereotypes. I’m talking with a type who escapes from things, prison, Devil’s Island, chains, walled enclosures, etc.

“So what’s your secret? How did you become known?” I ask.

“By committing suicide.”

“Really?”

“Not a real suicide, an official one.”

He then went on to describe how he had left his coat on a bridge with a suicide note pinned to it; how the police declared him dead and how the

newspapers had played up his death. He was finally known and the job offers from bad writers started pouring in. So, following his example, I went to a bridge over the deepest river in town; I wrote a suicide note, "My name is...and I have killed myself by jumping off this bridge." I removed my coat, pinned the note to it, left it on the bridge and walked away.

And...

**Note from the editor:** The story you have just read seems to have been ghostwritten by several persons. But nothing is known of them. —Gene Washington

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<sup>i</sup> For other related works on negation, the non-existent and the like see: Tim Crane, *The Objects of Thought*. Oxford 2013. Crane raises the question, and provides some provocative responses, to "how is it possible think about what does not exist? "What is the non-existent such a pervasive feature of our thought about the world?"

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<sup>ii</sup> "Why." *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2013:34-39

<sup>iii</sup>

(For detailed discussions of the non-existent, as mental representations, please see Tim Crane *Objects of Thought* . Oxford UP, 2014; Tuomas

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Tahko, *Contemporary Aristotelian Metaphysics*. Cambridge UP, 2011;  
Franz Clemens Brentano [1838–1917]; Alexius Meinong [17 July 1853 – 27  
November 1920]. I recommend the Stanford Encyclopedia entries on  
Brentano and Meinong: available online.)

<sup>v</sup> Shakespeare is perhaps the most fruitful source of the *uses* of shadows (and  
shade) as absence in all of literature. Bartlett, for example, counts 89  
examples of "shadow" and 37 of "shade" in the Bard's dramatic works. John  
Bartlett, *A Complete Concordance or Verbal Index to Words, Phrases and  
Passages in the Dramatic Words of Shakespeare*. (London: MacMillen,  
1894. Reprinted 1984).

The short story, "A Cloud of Inattention," was first published in *WordRiver*,  
a literary journal published by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.