

{...}

Smoking

I always envied the nineteenth century Romantics,¹ who could contract tuberculosis and thus live fast, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse;² what Mann had said about Art and Disease was ever present in my mind. So I smoked cigarettes as a kind of substitute. But this seemed like a sort of Faustian bargain — again, see Mann, the character of Leverkühn — and it seemed advisable to quit before the expiration of the XXIV years. Though naturally I put it off to the last minute.

{...}

So what happens after the brief flirtation with graduate school? — I go back to the night shift, and work seven days a week without a day off for a couple of years straight thereafter. — It is worse. It is always worse. I keep thinking there must be some light at the end of the tunnel but none ever appears. — Still I advance steadily, like the classic rock-climbing algorithm for getting up a chimney, quitting one job for another and working back and forth and edging ever upward, and arrive at the point at which my income is the largest it has been since quitting the Post Office: seriously, something like eighteen

¹ I applied this description not simply to e.g. Keats, but also to mathematical revolutionaries like Abel and Riemann, who met with a similar fate. If I were Spengler I would have some grand theory about the *Zeitgeist* that sheltered poetry and mathematics under the same tent, but of course it would be silly bullshit. The real principle here is that for a young man looking for heroes among his intellectual predecessors, the guys who died early and only left portraits of themselves as young men were the natural objects of attention.

² As a point of cinematic trivia, this line is uttered by, and may have originated with, the teenage punk character in the Bogart vehicle *Knock On Any Door* [Nicholas Ray, 1949] — a role played, curiously enough, by John Derek, an actor whose movie career didn't amount to much but whose subsequent marital history was spectacular, encompassing as it did Ursula Andress, Linda Evans, and Bo Derek.

hundred dollars a month, almost four times the rent; knowing I must treat this as a windfall and ignore supposed fixed expenses like taxes, I sleepwalk through the music stores shopping for the stereo I have never previously been able to afford, get a new four-head Sony VCR that will do proper freeze-frames so that I can study shot composition, and even pop for my very first (used) Zenith color TV.

Still, this is not stable equilibrium. Some fresh disaster must lie in the offing.

{...}

In the days before the principles of classical physics had been firmly established, indeed before there was any clear conception even of force laws, and all interaction was assumed to require direct contact, there was confusion about causality in mechanical interactions. Descartes, though he had a partial understanding of the conservation of momentum in, for instance, the collision of billiard balls, was not yet clear either on the vector character of momentum or the conservation of kinetic energy (aka vis viva, the contribution of Leibniz), which is required to render such problems well-defined. Thus to solve the paradoxes of dualism he suggested the mind might be able to affect the state of the body without violating physical causality by, as it were, altering the outgoing angles of an otherwise underdetermined collision; and suggested the site of this interference could be the pineal gland.³

I come to see that this was wrong. The actual interface lies in the hippocampus, which regulates, among other things, sleep and the immune system.

³ Here the Firesign Theater fan will recall *The Adventures of Nick Danger, Third Eye*; though if those were an elaborate cheat designed to get around the paradoxes of dualism I've certainly forgotten.

Why after a week or two on the night shift does everything seem dreamlike? Why do the days blur together? Because the hippocampus also regulates the conversion of short- into long-term memories, and this governs the internal clock that keeps track of the passage of time. This mechanism is damaged by perpetual sleep dysfunction, the inability to rest. — You have a vague awareness of the seasons changing and the day lengthening and shortening, but no real distinction of day or week or month. — Events pass from a discrete solid to a continuous liquid phase. They begin to flow into one another, like the fast-forwarded perceptions of the Time Traveller in George Pal's cinematic interpretation of Wells.

And you are always tired. After a while this becomes the central problem of your life, and every minute not spent working or walking the dogs is spent in a vain effort to *fix that* by trying to fall asleep. You can barely stand up, you are always stupid and pissed off, you talk to yourself, loudly and frequently, and you experience alarming episodes in which you catch yourself just as you have begun to collapse in a faint.

But you have to do it. And so you do.

After a year or so a mild cold circulates among the walking dead, and I catch it. Everyone else gets better in a few days, but I just get worse. I develop a cough that migrates from the top to the very bottom of my lungs, and becomes presently a stabbing pain in the chest (it does literally feel like a knife) that doubles me over in spasms, exciting the commentary of onlookers; more than once someone reminds me that you really *can* break your ribs with such a cough, and I must admit it does feel that way. After a couple of weeks I give up and go to the doctor (in this halcyon era there is still at least one relatively inexpensive⁴ walk-in clinic within the city); no great surprise, a chest X-ray reveals pneumonia. I get enough antibiotics for ten days, and,

⁴ To be precise: it cost me about fifty bucks, at the time less than a day's labor. (I assume it is understood that I have never had health insurance,)

still coughing at the end of that, enough for ten more. By the time I finish this second course I can breathe again. But now I haven't had a cigarette for a month, because I haven't been able to inhale.

So here is the dilemma: should I, as I always have before, pretend this never happened and take up where I left off?

Bear in mind that though I still haven't the faintest idea what is meant by "walking" pneumonia, I haven't missed a night of work in all this time — because I can't, that possibility literally does not exist — and that my job, through which I have staggered faithfully, consists of unloading the delivery truck and tossing a couple hundred bundles of newspapers around the warehouse (hard on the hands if you don't wear gloves, so mine generally look leprous) and then for several hours taking a few dozen of these myself and running them up and down the stairs of the university dormitories. (I have no keys to the elevators, and Murphy's Law entails that there is always some asshole on the fourth floor who insists on subscribing and will complain to the fucking publisher if he has to walk to the lobby to pick up his paper.)

In consequence I have spent all this time coming home from work, walking the dogs around the block, and then immediately collapsing into bed; where it has been essential to sleep curled up on my side, because when I cough, as happens every minute or two, I jackknife convulsively into the fetal position, and I can't allow this to wake me up.

The whole experience has in short been a burden of misery so colossal that I can't even summon the energy to whine about it — I try to impress myself with my fortitude, but I'm too tired for that too — and I have the overriding feeling that all this must be made to *mean* something, that it cannot be allowed to go for naught.

So. I have always told myself I would have to quit smoking sometime; and even though I have always immediately followed that with “Yeah, right,” I see that day has now arrived. I won’t go back.

The usual objection, the fear I have justifiably felt on the basis of previous experience (having quit once before for a year, passed most of it as a drooling idiot, and developed an alarming taste for alcohol as a substitute) was always that I would lose the ability to concentrate, but obviously the job has destroyed that already, and this will make no difference.

So that is that.

{...}

And what does this mean? Some of the consequences are interesting. — A couple of months later, for instance, I am explaining the newfound sensitivity of my nose to a friend as we are driving down a major thoroughfare at 35 miles an hour with the windows open. “I can smell a cigarette at a great distance.” I say. “For instance” — I point to a car a hundred feet ahead of us — “there’s a guy smoking in that car up there.” We pull up behind him at a red light. And sure enough.

Why has “second hand smoke” become such an issue? Because even though it doesn’t take more than two or three weeks to break the physical addiction, there is a long period of months or years thereafter when you are still sensitized to nicotine, and vulnerable to relapse. Even the slightest hit may reawaken the dormant addiction, and even exhaled smoke contains enough to put you at risk. — Once enough people have quit they have to make up stories (and then bullshit statistics) about the health hazard, but this is the real reason they don’t want smoke blown in their faces.

I make a solemn vow, never broken, not to be a self-righteous asshole about this issue, but for a very long time I carry a handkerchief I can wet and hold over my nose when smokers are present. To this day I

avoid inhaling smoke, and pull my shirt over my nose to filter it out when it is otherwise unavoidable.

{...}

Breaking the physical addiction, however, is the easy part. What is really difficult is life without cigarettes. Nothing is ever quite the same afterwards.

I do occasionally dream about it, but in waking life I am never tempted.

Still the fundamental dilemma is inescapable. Life with cigarettes is much better than life without them. But life with cigarettes is also a slow death. So what can you do?

In statistical mechanics this is called frustration: a situation in which the constraints defining an optimal configuration cannot be satisfied.⁵
— Or, in Leibnizian terms, this is not the best of all possible worlds.
— In that one, of course, right now I am sucking down on a Camel straight; but then in that one Jack Kennedy is always president, and we are building spaceships to go to the Moon.

At any rate I passed a number of severe stress tests shortly after the event without affecting my resolve — my landlady's pet drug dealer⁶ threatened to kill me and she evicted me in consequence, my father died and my family went bananas — I have nothing resembling willpower, but I am extraordinarily obstinate — and gradually restored most of my higher functions — though: it was at least a

⁵ A simple example is a system of two-valued spins on a lattice, in which the minimum energy is attained when adjacent spins point in opposite directions; think of bar magnets, for instance, allowed to point only up or down. On a square or hexagonal lattice this is easy to arrange; on a triangular lattice it is impossible. (The necessary and sufficient condition for satisfaction is that every closed circuit should have an even number of edges.) — The general solution to the Leibnizian problem of compossibility rests upon a relative triviality.

⁶ All she would say was “His father has a lot of money.” — Fuck you, Ronald Reagan.

month before I could talk coherently; a year before I could read;⁷ three years before I could write again (literally: I was unable to string three sentences together without forgetting the first); much longer than that before I could write a computer program or solve mathematical problems; and I still notice that certain elementary mental operations I could not perform at that time can perplex me momentarily, e.g. now and then I draw a blank on a double negative,⁸ or falter trying to figure out whether you over- or under-crank the camera to shoot in slow motion. — I remember staring blankly at a still from *Mister Arkadin*, wondering why it was supposed to illustrate Wellsian irony:



⁷ Even then it was easier if I ate ice cream while I did it. I suspect this was because of the soothing effects of tryptophan, since otherwise my eyeballs tended to leap away from the page.

⁸ Ironically one factoid I have retained about attempts to teach English to chimpanzees is that they couldn't process these either.

On the whole I wouldn't say that my powers of concentration were ever completely restored, particularly the ability to keep a mathematical argument in my head for an extended period;⁹ I did notice, however, that by way of compensation my ability to solve problems at a glance was somehow amplified, and thus paradoxically though I often couldn't remember how I had solved some problems before, I could now solve others I hadn't been able to previously.

So was everything for the best despite it all? Does Pangloss carry the argument? — Don't be ridiculous.

{...}

I remember standing with a cigarette in the Fleming House courtyard one afternoon, shortly after I'd gone abruptly from zero to a pack of Camels a day, when a friend (himself a confirmed nicotine addict) accosted me: "When did you start smoking?" he asked, with an inquisitive grin. — "When I quit amphetamines," I said. — Which cracked him up, as I knew it would, but like all my best jokes it was the simple truth: speed, I thought, was too alluring, it represented a real danger, best to dial it back to something easier to manage, something that wouldn't kill me quite so quickly. — There was a kind of principle of conservation of addictions that applied, which I could turn to my advantage.

(I also had the idea that it would Build Character to have something to quit. Of course this was true, but made the naive Romantic assumption that Building Character wasn't something one should avoid at all costs. My bad.)

⁹ There's a one-sentence proof, based on an idea of Liouville, of the theorem that any positive integer is the sum of four squares. I came across it once in the *American Mathematical Monthly*. The statement was so compressed that I literally read it over and over again for thirty or forty minutes before I understood it. I smoked five cigarettes in the process. Alas, nevermore.

So it was here that my career as a junkie came to an end, and left me with no further vices save espresso and Ben and Jerry's. — To these, however, I am faithful unto death.

{...}

Smoking, concluded

I was never under any illusions about what would happen if I were to light up again, even once, and since I knew that, and knew that I was not going to smoke any longer, I was never tempted. But I do occasionally dream about smoking — not that I crave a cigarette, though I have heard that others have had this problem — rather that I have noticed offhandedly that I am smoking, that I have been doing so off and on for a while, and that I am control of it, I can stop whenever I feel like it, it is no longer dangerous. — Thus the ghost of a dead addiction speaks to me from beyond the grave.