What Literature Teaches in Times of Crisis

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Plague Readings

By

David Pickus

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TO MY MOTHER AND THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was written in what appears to be a new era of crisis in human affairs. Consequently, the kindness, courtesy and help enabling me to complete it are that much more appreciated. Most thanks I prefer to convey privately, but one acknowledgment is a special case. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Binh Tran, the Chancellor of the American University in Vietnam, whose encouragement gave me space to carry the project through. I am also grateful to the faculty and staff at this multicultural institution. Such support strengthens my belief in the value of reading and writing, as well as the importance of seeking global understanding.

INTRODUCTION

The best introductions get right down to it. And so: The following pages analyze 34 works of short fiction and two novels. The interpretive lens is the meaning of trauma and crisis. While the COVID pandemic was hardly the worst disaster humanity has suffered or will suffer, everyone who lived through the years 2019-2022 is now different, and probably harmed. Our relationship to literature has altered as well.

The guiding principle of *Plague Readings* is that older and sometimes forgotten works have grown in interest because of what we have endured. The stories considered here are more compelling and their insights sharper when we notice that the authors understood calamities and difficulties in a manner that resonates with our own. Showing this is an exercise in appreciation. In their day, the authors studied were (more or less) well-known, and a few remain quite celebrated. But most people, most of the time, do not say, "I'm turning to these literary masters to help me clarify my own experience." Yet, that's exactly what I recommend. The fact that the bulk of these titles, even the ones by undeniably famous authors, have faded from memory adds a joy of discovery. You may see familiar pieces, but I would be surprised if even book lovers are well familiar with them all. Reading these chapters will introduce and reacquaint you with fiction you might have missed or forgotten, and can, in fact, profit by. That's my intention. I will have succeeded if the analysis forges a deeper sense of connection with those who wrote them and the concerns that moved them.

Such engagement is not necessarily pleasant. While I have something complimentary to say about all the works, I have included them here because of their insight into dangers we have an incentive to ignore. Like literary critics everywhere, I argue for and against different readings, typically making the case that what is found in bygone authors is much less bland and obvious, more pointed and disquieting, than what a "presentist" mindset might otherwise think. Of course, this is not the first time that someone has sought to rediscover and renew the meaning of classic texts. However, the context in which the project was undertaken has the novelty

of having, as a catalyst, the experience and dangers of the COVID era. Indeed, the first version of several chapters were written in full lockdown. My intended audience is not from a distant age where 21st-century troubles have grown academic. It's flattering to think that someday this book might help future historians, but the ones primarily addressed are those who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic (should it indeed be over) and have gone on to live in the era of cascading troubles that followed.

Because the kind of familiarity that impedes knowing is an enemy[1], every chapter starts with fundamentals, conveying sufficient information so that the work and its significance can be considered fresh—without going so far so as to spoil the fun of individual reading. I've also tried to strike a balance between everyday and scholarly speech. Each piece raises complex historical, psychological and philosophical issues. Thus, I've tried to not to simplify, but to consider deeply without using overly technical language. In cases of doubt, I've chosen to err on the side of the pedagogical, spelling things out to the uninitiated, rather than run the risk of confining the conversation to specialists. The extent to which I've succeeded in striking a proper balance, and even more, the aptness of my interpretations, is for the reader to decide, and I would be very happy if people were inspired to turn/return, upon completion, to the originals. In the conclusion, I explain why the times require that we continue to read literature in this fashion and why I hope variants of "Plague Reading" projects spread.

At the end, I also add a few words about the path that led to the book and how it changed my relationship to reading literature. But that's for later. At the start, the important thing is to bear in mind that the authors considered here knew suffering and turned it into insight. For this reason, from academic experts to first-time readers, I think everyone who takes up *Plague Readings* will begin to feel close to at least a few of the writers discussed. Not comfortably close. They aren't comfortable people. But in hard times, uncomfortable people can be precisely what we need in friends. The following chapters can be read in any order, but the one laid out provides a convenient path to explore many of the pandemic's implications.

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[1] This is a restatement of the old Hegel dictum, "*Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es bekannt ist, nicht erkannt*." The hyperbole is compensated for by untranslatable word play. But the main point stands, familiarity gets in the way of the attention paying that is necessary for true knowledge.

These authors have so much to say about what it means to live in times of crisis that it's now time to end the introduction and listen to their words.

1

E.M FORSTER: "THE MACHINE STOPS" AND STANISLAW LEM: "THE FIRST SALLY (A), OR TRURL'S ELECTRONIC BARD"

In 1974, well before the Internet's dominance, science writer Lewis Thomas wrote: "Without paying a fee, or filling out a questionnaire, all of us are being linked in similar circuits, for other reasons, by credit bureaus, the census, the tax people, the local police station, or the Army. Sooner or later, if it keeps on, the various networks will begin to touch, fuse, and then, in their coalescence, they will start sorting and retrieving each other, and we will all becomes bits of information on an enormous grid."[1] This prescient comment is no longer sui generis, but the implications of being interlinked still need thought, especially when the very same grid problems bring us to grief. This is what makes a short story from more than a hundred years ago, written by a man barely 30 years of age, even more remarkable. E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" (1909) is unsettlingly prophetic of a plague society.[2] This is not Europe's Black Death society of the 14th century, with its open and evident terrors. Rather, it's a world to which we have grown familiar in the age of COVID: compartmentalized yet nonetheless "wired" and legitimated by the desire to minimize risk.

Here are a few highlights from the world Forster describes. Everyone lives in isolation, dwelling in separate little chambers, "a small room, hexagonal in shape, like the cell of a bee."[3] They live underground because the outside air is dangerous, and a respirator is needed in order to

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[1] Lewis Thomas, *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), 24.
[2] E. M. Forster, "The Machine Stops," in *The Collected Tales of E.M. Forster* (New York: Knopf, 1947), 144-97, Originally published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Review*, 8 (1909): 83 – 122.
[3] Forster, 144.

breathe. They are afraid of the outdoors, where some catastrophe appears to have taken place. Despite this isolation, people are in constant contact with each other through media technology, which thereby becomes the sole focus of all their social impulses and longings. The main character, Vashti, knows "several thousand people, [for] in certain directions human intercourse had advanced enormously."[4] Yet, this advance is exclusively in the realm of the virtual. People communicate by holding a plate from which blue light glows, followed by the image of another's face. Otherwise, they use what is called the "pneumatic post" for easy, cost-free and, evidentially, low-quality exchange. The upshot appears to be a world noticeably reminiscent of the real world circa the 2020s, in that people do not leave their rooms, interact only through this media, call their contacts "friends," and either accept or have simply lost cognizance of the fact that their technology "did not transmit nuances of expression. It only gave a general idea of people."[5]

Moreover, this social media is itself sustained by an interlocking grid of services and supply chains, a socioeconomic matrix that everyday citizens understand only dimly. But ignorant as they are, they have a name for it. They call it "The Machine" and treat it with reverence. This Machine standardizes everything and meets all physical, social and psychological needs. People stay confined in their cell and push a button for everything. An ornate volume—the only book one has—provides instructions on which button to push. Bureaucratically, it is, it is called "The Book of the Machine."[6]

The unaccountable authorities claim to be benign. However, they do not respond to suffering due what we would call "loss of service." At one point, Vashti grows dissatisfied with the prevarications of a kind of help desk and tries to reach someone in management, which she vaguely knows as a "Central Committee." She receives the answer: "No personal complaints are received by the Central Committee." Instead, she must remonstrate with the equivalent of a service counter, which replies, "Your complaint shall be forwarded in its turn."[7] This would evoke frustration even in times of optimal functioning, but what's happening is worse. The Machine has begun to break down, without admitting the fact. For the rest of the story, it avoids

[4] Forster, 145.
[5] Forster, 148.
[6] Forster, 151.
[7] Forster, 188-89.

acknowledging its decay, because it does not want to account for its own demise. One can easily see why this story retains its interest more than a century after it was composed. It is tempting to call this piece prophetic, but it also helps to note that it only generally describes the world of today. True, Forster not only appears to foresee the Internet, but his account of transcontinental air travel, and all the complaints that accompany it, manages to evoke a strikingly contemporary picture of aviation. Forster even imagines a situation where a large transportation fleet is kept running without passengers merely to stay in business, as it is "too big to fail." But, despite such prescience, technology or futurology was not his main focus. He does not explain how the glowing plate works and the air travel he envisions is a kind of zeppelin. Saying this is not to depreciate Forster, but rather to suggest that the story should be read as an evocative reflection of the author's own times, one that also foreshadowed the future.

The aspect of science that Forster most noticed was the development of managed systems that integrate and subordinate masses of humanity into a system of continuous production and consumption.[8] This concern was not unique and has become a mainstay of modern dystopian fiction. However, it is worth noting that Forster stood toward the head of the queue and can be listed as a creator of one of the 20th century's most famous dystopias. This story appears to be directly referenced in Huxley's *Brave New World*, where it is noted that, "The machine turns, turns and must keep on turning—forever. It is death if it stands still."[9] The "Machine," in both Forster and Huxley, primarily refers to supply chains and everything on each end, producers, consumers and administrators alike.

Huxley's, as well as Orwell's, efforts at dystopia are better known, but Forster set the agenda, and he deserves credit as a progenitor of this branch of "this could happen" fiction. Indeed, in the question of leadership, there is one facet where Forster's story strikes me as being more

[8] In the wake of World War I, the collapse of global economies in the Great Depression, and the rise of totalitarian governments and other forms of mass mobilization, this topic became a preoccupation of social theorists. See, for example, the works of Emil Lederer (1882-1939). Forster's piece in contrast to these scholarly tomes is naturally much more playful but adds substance to the notion that scientific theory begins in artistic inspiration.

[9] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Bantam Books, 1962), 28.

perspicacious than some of its more prominent progeny.[10] As different as they are, *Brave New World* and *1984* agree that those in charge rule absolutely. In Orwell's case, they do so for absolute ill, whereas Huxley's masters are not deliberately malevolent and realize a definite good of social stability, albeit at a terrible human cost. But they each basically know what they're doing. In contrast, Forster was more attuned to the arbitrary and blind-marching character of human events, and the concomitant failure of leaders to actually lead competently. Rather than being omnipotently sinister controllers in charge of everything, or clear failures overthrown by revolt, Forster's leaders work by committee, shield themselves from all real interaction with the populace and appear to spend most of their time trying to stamp out bugs in their Machine before things spiral out of control. As the story unfolds, we see that, for a certain amount of time, they have succeeded in holding off collapse. The title refers to the end of their success.

Here the piece clearly resonates with our own age. Before our time, Forster already noticed that this grid of interface between technology and humanity is strong enough to enmesh us utterly, but not strong enough to ensure we can live humanely, or even safely. Forster's artistry lies in his perceptiveness in showing how easy it is for a society to move into a "cannot live without it, cannot live with it" position as regards its all-encompassing grids. As the fully co-opted characters put it in faux prayer: "The Machine…feeds us and clothes us and houses us; through it we speak to one another, through it we see one another, in it we have our being. The Machine is the friend of ideas and the enemy of superstition: the Machine is omnipotent, eternal; blessed is the Machine."[11] Actually, as Forster a bit acerbically tells us, the Machine is decidedly less than eternal. It is tempting to quote more from the story, since it also has much clever sarcasm that remains funny, provided you are willing to keep a sense of humor about everything going under and humanity dying. However, it is better to read it for yourself, as the clever parts are intertwined with the whole. As the humor—as in *Brave New World*—is designed to needle readers into

[10] We should not overdo the founder metaphor. Forster sounded themes earlier voiced in H.G. Wells's novella, *The Time Machine* (1895). Wells himself appears to have been influenced by William Morris. There is no single ancestor and all these works gain when read in conjunction with each other.
[11] Forster, 184.

uncomfortable recognition that they are on the way to co-optation, so the amusing parts work best when read in context.

More important is to summarize some of the social-psychological implications, because Forster was too honest a writer to confine himself to the easy-target faults of officious and fallible administrators. In fact, the sociological value of the story after more than a century lies in showing that individuals exacerbate the problem with the grid, not only because of what an administrative society has made of them, but, additionally, because their dreary situation offers opportunities to choose *further* degradation.

Here is a partial list of the things the characters do to make life worse for everyone. 1) They have their needs met by an unseen apparatus, making them highly irritable at any interruption, while simultaneously unwilling or unable to concentrate. They hold (virtual) discussion events about serious subjects, but these only last about 10 minutes, and are diversions without substance. 2) They are constantly tuned in to their version of social media, with the companionship of "friends" always available. Yet, this contact does not seem to matter much to them, so deeper relationships never develop. 3) They continually seek artificial stimulation, which they inaccurately call "ideas." For instance, they also highly approve of a (suspiciously contentless) religion because it allows them to feel both exulted and reassured, without changing anything for the better. The answers to the question of why they are like this can easily overlap with answers to questions of why pandemic conditions exacerbated already dubious habits. Hence, thinking about the story may put one's own lockdown behavior in perspective. Forster was an early critic of the pose of being busy, noting its appeal to those who never accomplish anything meaningful. He also drew a connection between the interest in all things titillating, while simultaneously being prudish and hysterical at the possibility of actual contact. Yet as for an answer as to how this isolating, atomizing world came about, and why the inhabitants so eagerly adapted themselves to it, Forster leaves us to reflect for ourselves.

One thought occurs. In a particularly satirical passage, a famous and well-placed intellectual of the Machine world delivers a short speech on the topic of the French Revolution. Actually, he does not get around to the historical event and, in the end, fatuously says nothing. In fact, neither he nor his audience has any wish to genuinely engage with the "blood that

was shed at Paris and the windows that were broken at Versailles."[12] Instead, all he speaks about are "impressions" of the revolution held by a series of increasingly inconsequential authors, to the point where people are actually pleased that they cannot grasp the actual passions and terrors of the original, being, as they put it in a supposedly laudatory poem, "a generation absolutely colourless, a generation 'seraphically free from taint of personality.'"[13] Lest anyone think that this stance refers only to the French Revolution or academic topics in history, Forster makes it clear that the real appeal of talking around problems is that it endorses the notion that "terrestrial facts must be ignored." In other words, dependency on the grid or "Machine" is both the cause and consequence of all this passivity. If the inhabitants of Forster's world weren't so dependent, they wouldn't need all this timid rationalization. And if they didn't applaud their own passivity—they love the vacuous French Revolution lecture—they wouldn't so slavishly want to be part of the Machine.

Forster does not demand that we see ourselves in these characters. People can decide for themselves the extent to which their own behavior is simply an everyday, more normal version of what's seen in the story. It is interesting to note that the characters are very susceptible to slights and instantly seek out a "specialist in sympathy" the moment their on-screen performance does not garner unequivocal acclaim. Forster also makes it clear that, despite being easygoing, or perhaps because of it, they are quite capable of being vindictive, particularly if someone threatens their place in the grid, or merely seems capable of living without it. In this world, social ostracism is prized as a weapon by those who otherwise timidly disavow conflict. However, Forster never insists that he's talking about real life, and it helps to ask how Forster came to warn against such contemporary-sounding evils. The short answer is that he didn't know he was talking about future ages. While the story is in many ways prophetic, it is more rewarding not to think he was speaking especially to us, but to reflect on what "The Machine Stops" might have meant for the era Forster wrote. A biographical detail that strikes me as important is that Forster—who lost his father when he was only 2 years old—inherited enough money to live comfortably, even

[12] Forster, 182.
[13] Forster, 183.

as he devoted his considerable skill and disciplined energy to becoming a writer. In living this way, I suspect he gained enough insight into the relation between social classes to notice how fast things were changing and why such changes contributed to the possibility of "the machine stopping."

Consider Forster's world, pre-1914. For the extremely wealthy and deferred-to sliver of humanity, the period before the First World War was a kind of golden autumn.[14] Technology, industry, medicine and commerce had reached the point where this elite could enjoy a level of safety, health, and consumer goods that an Elizabeth I or Louis XIV could only dream about, even with their status and wealth. Simultaneously, bureaucratic and social control was not as intrusive. They could enjoy their good fortune with little or no income tax and could travel at will, often with nary a care for passports and visas. Laws and rules rested lightly on them,[15] and even nature was experienced in a friendlier way. Apparently, the young Forster was able to spend extended vacations on the Mediterranean, in the form not of crowded tourist packages, but rather of flower-filled holidays. This is not to suggest that this group had no troubles, and certainly not to imply their fun was worth other people's suffering—a book titled *Late Victorian Holocausts* provides an idea of how severe this suffering could be.[16] I mention this biographical detail because it points to something about Forster's particular circumstances. He was a perceptive person and had the requisite courage to discern the nature and fragility of his "bubble." You can almost hear him thinking as he glanced at the headlines, "How grim. I'd like the good things to last, but the pity is they can't."

If this suggestion holds, it also accounts for the lofty tone of the narrator, as well as an aspect of the story that I think has not aged well, namely a subplot suggesting that while everyone else meekly perishes, an elite few of the hardy survive, and even revel in the tough conditions. It is not surprising to find this theme in the story. It was an entirely conventional

[14] Vivid portraits showing how and why the period has been portrayed this way can be found in Barbara Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890–1914*, (New York: Macmillan, 1962) and Philipp Blom, *The Vertigo Years: Change and Culture in the West, 1900–1914*, (New York: Basic Books, 2008).
[15] But not always, as Oscar Wilde knew.
[16] Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2000).

idea of the time.[17] Among the intellectuals who held it, no small number died in the First World War, sometimes bitterly lamenting their pre-war illusions. This notion that "civilization makes us sissies" mars Forster's tale, but luckily—I think—it is not prominent enough to wreck it. There is nothing unusual about a story being insightful in some respects and blinkered in others. It characterizes not only this piece, but all the ones to follow.[18] What's truly important is that Forster saw that the point is not so much to debate whether the Machine is good or bad, but to foresee that it can stop, not least because people have embraced the lethargy inherent in it. That's the truth he continues to teach.

To conclude, I believe that two of Forster's central ideas are likely to keep resonating. The first is that the residents of this world push buttons but do not give much thought about what makes the world work and why. This puts them in very bad stead when things stop working. Anyone's life can fall apart and can do so quickly. However, there is something pitiful about a world collapsing while people spend their time pushing non-functioning buttons. The button-pushers did not directly cause the collapse, but it's hard to avoid the conclusion that lack of honest effort in personal relationships made them complicit in their own demise. Forster's characters are fully convinced that they are authentic people, living principled lives. However, the bulk of them assiduously avoid any experience that might test their authenticity. Worse, even though they have little in the way of options, there is something welcoming in their attitude toward isolation. This makes it all the easier for their Machine to render them docile. They are utterly dumbfounded when a slow accumulation of interlinked shortcomings and problems cascades into doom.

[17] The historian George L. Mosse has covered this theme in several works.
[18] And applies to the people that read them.

A Follow-Up, Stanisław Lem: "The First Sally (A), or Trurl's Electronic Bard"

Whether or not Forster can be called the Ur progenitor of the story in which everyone and everything is controlled by a "Machine," it is clear that since his time, such stories have "increased and multiplied." Fictional accounts of a totalizing apparatus taking all true decision making out of the individual's hands are so familiar that we likely do not notice when another one appears. It takes a highly imaginative author to come up with a new twist to the issue, especially one that takes into account the ever-expanding algorithms that we are already familiar with. It is stunning that in 1965 a writer in a forcibly isolated, technologically deprived society looked deeply into the future of scientific data accumulation and wrote darkly humorous fiction about it. This writer was Stanisław Lem (1921-2006).

Lem was a Pole of Jewish heritage, though he was born in what today is Ukraine, and was not raised Jewish. Rather, the most salient experience of his first decades was the genocidal war that destroyed nations as they once existed, forcing him into hiding and almost killing him. Then there were additional years of fear and constriction in Stalinist Poland. It would take a longer study to fill in the picture, but in this atmosphere, the young Lem turned both to fiction and science, using both to envision where humanity might be heading. He was notably fertile in his imaginings. In "The First Sally (A), or Trurl's Electronic Bard" (1965), he saw something about machine learning that resonates long after its composition, especially as the COVID age made it obvious that people can be quite deficient in their capacity to assess probability.[19] We can imagine the pandemic period as the first time that it was not only feasible, but plain to see, that artificial intelligence could one day decidedly overtake human thinking.

Lem's story is precisely about this moment of overtaking. One useful point about Lem for those new to him is that the tone (but not message) is light, satirical and funny. He has two running characters who—apart from a super-computer—are the central figures in the story. They are called Trurl and Klapaucius, friends and academic scientists, which means their

[19] Stanisław Lem, "The First Sally (A), or Trurl's Electronic Bard," in *The Cyberiad; Fables for the Cybernetic Age*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1974). Translated by Michael Kandel from the original Polish, *Cyberiada* (1967).

friendship consists of immature, petty rivalry. A sizable portion of the story's humor involves them using their great intellects to one-up and undermine each other. To put his rival in his place, Trurl takes it into his head to build a poetry writing machine, which is the event that sets the plot in motion. Consequently, this may be one of the first stories to make an effort to imagine how a machine learns to write "human" poetry. This process was also an occasion for Lem to make several jokes in which the computer writes a poem that somehow stymies the intention of the person who asks for it.[20] But the work's serious aspirations are also easy to discern, and this is our focus.

In devising all this, Lem makes an obvious point about the totalizing reach of what Forster called the Machine. Yet it's an observation that we do not hear gladly, so we ignore its obviousness. Furthermore—and somewhat insidiously—Lem's whimsically contrived situation leads us to let down our guard, so the unsettling aspect of the story can take us unawares. In artificial knowledge systems, even the most innocuous, non-threatening task requires continual accumulation of information. From there, it is only a few naturally taken steps to an aspiration, blandly concealed under technicalities, to aggregate *all* information and knowledge. With coy innocence, Lem explains that to teach a computer to write a poem, you need to reproduce the mind of a poet, as broadly defined: "The program found in the head of an average poet, after all, was written by the poet's civilization, and that civilization was in turn programmed by the civilization that preceded it, and so on to the very Dawn of Time."[21] This is breezily expressed, but it isn't wrong. AI programs attempting to influence, for instance, consumer or health choices make no promise of stopping at an agreed-upon point of data collection. Indeed, if left to go their own way, they must keep going in order to "learn." The preceding quotation marks do not convey irony, only the emphasis that this is non-human learning. With admirable prescience, Lem grasped how rapidly a program could move from (to us) laughable incomprehension of human matters to full mastery (in our view). Lem did not try to predict the technological advances that would advance machine learning. Rather, intentionally or not, he supplied a

[20] By all appearances, the translator, Michael Kandel, did an amazing job. The poems in the English version are witty and interesting.
[21] Lem, 43-44.

powerful rejoinder to anyone whose response to Forster was "I'll just break out of the Machine and join the tough ones who can make it on their own." The serious component of Lem's answer is that we wind up beholden to that program which learns the quickest. Don't be so certain about busting out. You might not be able to wish away the fact that, mortal or not, the Machine still knows more than you.

This consideration leads to Lem's next insight, namely, human denial in the face of machine superiority. Toward the end of the story, human poets—after trying to ignore Trurl's machine—become aware that they can no longer hide from its manifest compositional skill. Therefore, they look for ways to demean it. Avant-garde poets, for instance, jeer because the machine writes only in classical style. That triumph, however, is short-lived: "The machine was self-programming, however, and in addition had a special ambition-amplifying mechanism with glory-seeking circuits, and very soon a great change took place. Its poems became difficult, ambiguous, so intricate and charged with meaning that they were totally incomprehensible. When the next group of poets came to mock and laugh, the machine replied with an improvisation that was so modern, it took their breath away."[22] Authors of opinion pieces saying not to worry because "AI will never do that" should consider this passage because it is not only made-up computers that can learn to reproduce ambition and "glory-seeking" mechanisms. In Forster's world, art is permanently degraded by the Machine. In Lem's story there's no need to imagine anything so apocalyptic. Instead, without fanfare, art is simply outclassed, perhaps because it never had the class it claimed. This might be amusing if done to groups you already despise, but the implicit message is: "You're on the list."

In our own time, at this stage conversation often veers to a consideration of whether AI actually thinks or merely predicts by calling up probable choices. Lem's story suggests, however, that the important distinction is not so much between thinking and sorting, as between accepting or denying that our supposedly individual ideas are already so susceptible to algorithms that they are readily incorporated into AI systems. Once again, Lem was prophetic in recognizing that people would fight against the Machine, but without the latter recognizing or caring that it was

[22] Lem, 54.

a fight. Thus, the poets rally their group and attempt to confront Trurl's computer with an artistry it cannot match. However, this simply enables more learning. In the end, "The machine quickly grew so adept at this, that it could cut down a first-class rhapsodist with no more than one or two quatrains. But the worst of it was, all the third-rate poets emerged unscathed; being third-rate, they didn't know good poetry from bad and consequently had no inkling of their crushing defeat."[23]

This is the Dunning-Kruger effect *avant la lettre.* Maybe Lem deserves recognition as one of the first writers to put this human phenomenon into words. Most important, there's no reason to presume that the satirical point applies only to poets. If you cannot take the measure of your own patterns of thinking, you won't admit that the Machine has taken the measure of you. You will not realize what it signifies for your ideas to be mechanically anticipated and reproduced. To be sure, Lem allows, "The true poets, on the other hand, were decimated by Trurl's electronic bard, though it never laid a finger on them."[24] However, this did not mean he holds out hope that "true" poetry would prevail. We tend to think of such systems as either evoking acquiescence or resistance on the part of human beings, but the more accurate alternative may be oblivion/denial or depression. After all the clowning, this is the somber culmination. More than any high-tech prediction, it is why the story retains its interest.

What did Lem make of this choice between depression and denial? Unfortunately, he didn't say. The story's ending is silly. Surviving in meager times, Lem earned his living by writing, so he may have had to end the piece abruptly to get on to something else. Additionally, he wrote under censorship, meaning he probably had to stay one step ahead of those hectoring him to keep his work "uplifting" in the official fashion.[25] Refusing to get too serious at the close probably helped him carry on to write again. Finally, Lem may simply have been saddened by what he foresaw. A "novel writing machine" was a feature in Orwell's dystopian world. But a command to (fill in chirpy robot name) "Write a poem in the style of Keats and a story in the manner of Faulkner" is quite possible now, and likely we will soon reach the point where even an expert might be

[23] Lem, 54.
[24] Lem, 54.
[25] See Solzhenitsyn's struggles in this regard (Chapter 6).

unsure if the product was authentic or machine-created. For ordinary writers, the point almost certainly has already been passed where AI programs can say exactly what you want to say, with no personal effort expended. In 2022, a spate of news articles declared that AI will end the "personal statement" essay that colleges require in an application. This is easy to believe, as even without AI, students had long been coached into writing treacly sentiments that followed formulaic and predictable paths. However, the real issue is not the application essay; it is the putative actual essays that come later, including dissertations and a career spent in writing (or "writing"). I don't know when the point will be reached when no one—not even the author—can be entirely certain whether they wrote something or not. In any case, Lem's story is no longer so whimsical, so its letdown of an ending does not greatly matter.

COVID was the first occasion in human history when AI was enlisted in vast efforts at public coordination and disease control. It was not applied consistently, and the results were incomplete and sometimes ineffective—as Lem's story suggests would happen. Yet, the Machine learned. Eventually, the only escape was not an escape at all: you simply were not aware, or were denying, or were lazily pleased with the extent that you were reproducible by something artificial. That's why it is instructive to read Lem in conjunction with Forster. The divergent paths of the two stories are compatible. The Machine that reduces you to an algorithm can also break down. That can happen.

2

FRANZ KAFKA: "A REPORT TO AN ACADEMY" AND "THE BURROW," WITH AN ADDENDUM ON JOHN O'HARA'S "GRAVEN IMAGE"

People interested in literature tend to know something of Franz Kafka. But this knowledge isn't identical to what is conveyed by the widely applied description "Kafkaesque." The adjective is trotted out so often and imprecisely that it impedes our understanding of Kafka, the author. In everyday parlance, "Kafkaesque" is primarily used as a synonym for "nightmarish," especially if the nightmare takes the form of a bizarre disruption of everyday life. To use this term effectively, we do not need to define the nature of the nightmare very strictly. It could simply be a normal instance of the aggravating and unwelcome, as in, "I had to wait so long it was Kafkaesque." Kafka's name can thereby serve to signify "unexpectedly bad," as well as "You won't believe this." There is not necessarily much real Kafka content in the Kafkaesque; what's more, something is lost if we make what has become a multipurpose word substitute for an engagement with Kafka's writing. Kafka is not his adjective (though you can imagine he left some fragment where he imagined he was). Kafka's work, even though it is almost always about unhappy and anxiety-provoking subjects, has a more precise meaning than "generally nightmarish." In fact, his works can easily mean the opposite of what people imply when they use his name loosely. This line of inquiry is a good way to enter the world of Kafka's stories and ask whether current traumas provide sharper insight into what makes this fiction distinctively Kafka's.

Most readers understand when one speaks of Kafkaesque tax forms or insurance regulations. Yet even though such forms and rules are often hard to grasp and sometime intentionally devious, they really aren't what Kafka described. Consider *The Trial* (1914-15/1925), a novel where the protagonist is arrested and never discovers why. Not that he never learns

anything. Rather, he constantly learns new information and has new experiences, none of which reveals what he most needs to know. *That's* Kafkaesque. In contrast to tax and insurance complaints, where it is often quite difficult to get accurate information, there typically is a non-Kafkaesque, i.e., fathomable, reason matters have gone wrong, even if its full nature is not forthcoming or is revealed to be illogical. Kafka's fiction, however, is weirder. It is generally correct, but too vague, to say that Kafka's works are about things that are bad, or even about things that are inexplicably bad. I think it is more accurate to conclude that they are about something arguably worse, namely *being trapped*. For instance, in another of his famous stories, *The Metamorphosis* (1915), the protagonist becomes a giant insect. He suddenly wakes up to find himself that way, trapped with all the problems an outsized insect would have, such as not being able to turn over should you happen to be lying on your back in a human bed. You might ask why that particular problem ought to become a subject of literature, but in Kafka's story no effort is made to figure out why the transformation has happened.[1] It is not even about declaring that there is no explanation. Instead, the plot, such as it is, revolves around how the main character is supposed to get up and go to work, despite being a bug and no longer a human. Kafka does not *want* explanations. As a corollary to this, there is no authoritative commentary clarifying the absence of explanations, as that non-explanation would function as a reason why.[2] Rather, the narrative focuses on the *experience* of being trapped. I would go so far as to say that this is the first law of Kafka exposition and the only one that cannot be (in some bizarre manner) broken, which means it is the only law. Someone must have made this point earlier. If anyone has said that everything he wrote pertains to this theme, I agree.

[1] The English name "Metamorphosis" is not as clear as the original, *Die Verwandlung*. The English calls up old myths in which the same character is transformed into different creatures. We still use that term to describe, for instance, the change of caterpillar into butterfly or moth. However, while *Verwandlung* can mean that, it has a more concrete sense of "transformation" without any sense of process. Something simply becomes something else.

[2] Byzantine speculations are another story.

To be sure, the notion of "being trapped" can be defined so loosely that it can cover anyone preoccupied with troubles or sorrows. However, that's not Kafka's world. His characters are always trapped in very weird but precise ways. Kafka's aesthetic appeal comes from becoming a connoisseur of different ways of being utterly trapped. In this sense, the term "Kafkaesque" when it moves away from general use into literary analysis has a narrower and more precise meaning than "Shakespearean," "Goethean," etc. It means the various techniques that Kafka uses to portray nothing other than being trapped, and the window into the human condition we obtain when the implications of this trapped condition sink in.

If you are starting to feel trapped by all the talk of being trapped, hoping I'd begin to talk of something else, and noticing that, nope, just when you think you'll break free, the topic of being trapped returns, then you've caught on. Successfully reading Kafka involves resisting the urge to escape. This is easier to understand if we recognize that some of Kafka's best work is not as mysterious as it is often accused of being. There may be opaque and obscure reasons why a person is arrested, can't get out of bed, can't deliver a message, etc., but Kafka describes all these painful and uncanny situations (and more) with lucid clarity. He does not invite us to say, "I cannot explain this." Rather, he invites us to imagine ourselves trapped in the same odd way that the characters are trapped. Then we must ask what this imprisonment means. To be sure, the text does not say we *must* ask this, but I think this is the most important question prompted by Kafka's work.

An associated claim is that the bulk of Kafka's work can and should be read as a parable, a tale in which one thing stands for something

else.[3] Parables are a good way of asking what imprisonment and being trapped means. Of course, Kafka's parables are not like others, particularly because of the imaginatively unusual situations in which they are set. But at the same time that Kafka stretches his reader's limits as to the form of the parable, he also significantly expands the scope of what is allegorized. As a side note, with Kafka there is no profit in trying to distinguish between parable, allegory and fable. All of those terms could be applied to his works, provided that you return from the theorizing to focus on the many horrifying ways that people can be trapped.[4]

A good example is what I think is one of the best of Kafka's efforts, namely "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie," or "A Report to an Academy" (1917). This story is narrated by an ape, who is standing in a fancy room full of high-class cultural figures, reminiscing about the path that took him from being an animal shot, wounded and imprisoned in a cage to being a prominent celebrity, though still an animal. His smooth language downplays the fact that his fame consists of being a captive circus performer. If he succeeds in making you forget that for a while, you've accompanied him on a temporary escape. From the start of literature, talking animals have been a source of interest and amusement. But in all the examples from Homer and the Bible onward, little or no attention is paid to the way an actual animal might feel. This air of unreality simply propels our attention back to

[3] This view is not the majority one among academics, who are leery of interpreting Kafka in a reductive fashion. As a matter of fact, I think Kafka is a reductive author, in that his stories are rich variations on one theme. Other writers, including specialists, disagree, and it is valuable for those wanting to deepen their studies to expose themselves to different views. One point, however, should not be subject to debate: Kafka's parables are not infinitely malleable. To do them justice, you have to enter into their spirit and not simply read your own concerns into them. For instance, it is useful to look at how Kafka is put to use in emigré scholar Erich Fromm's 1947 work, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*. Fromm primarily used Kafka's *The Trial* to illustrate his own psychological theories. These theories are worth considering, but it is not evident that Fromm is correct in concluding that Kafka's central message is about not wasting one's life. It is also unclear if Fromm's own argument is helped by invoking *The Trial*. Although older, James Rolleston's edited volume, *20th Century Interpretations of the Trial* (Hoboken, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976), is very useful in identifying enduring trends in the academic study of Kafka. The piece by Maurice Blanchot, pp. 11-20, strikes me as being particularly influential.

[4] That's it. I promise to stop.