

## of improbable likenesses and impossible comparisons

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One is still alive (after all that has happened, in spite of the risks) and (for the moment) one is glad to be alive; one reads, if reading pleases, say, for example, *The Way of Ants* or *Homo Ludens* or something like *Man's Unbearable Mind* and, (reading) learns and (learning) thinks and (thinking) reflects and (reflecting) discovers and, like Marco Polo, (discovering and living long enough to return and tell) realizes some part of what it means to be alive, that one is united in some mysterious way, fortunate (for there are innumerable roads leading to innumerable fabulous cities), blessed. But one has lost a friend (a friend is dead)—a suicide, a traffic accident, a riot, an incomprehensible disease, a war that has not yet begun (the list is endless); one is not consoled by the fact that there will be more deaths, many more deaths (more deaths than all the roads leading to all the fabulous cities combined), that there is much more to be lost, more than one can ever hope to imagine or believe, that death in every form and in all places (even in the wonderful cities) is necessary and inevitable. Still one (spends one's days) read(ing)s and learn(ing)s and think(ing)s and reflect(ing)s and discover(ing)s and know(ing)s that one is alive and should be grateful (to whom, and for what?).

By means of a conceivable, if not a conceptual, analogy: the word gossamer. Goose summer or *gaze à Marie*? Early each autumn (sometime around Michaelmas, the 29th of September [by the Gregorian calendar], about the time of year when geese may begin to be observed migrating south) the tiny nearly invisible spider young (perfect imitations to the smallest detail of the mother who has brooded over them—after [probably, almost certainly, yes definitely] devouring the foolhardy father who had fertilized them—for the last six months to a year) wait for the calm apparently breezeless morning when the heat on the earth's surface will be just enough to create a slight upward vacuum of warmed air which will carry them, borne by the silk gliders they have spun and cast for themselves, to their various destinations, places they

do not yet know before they set out (places which may be only a few meters away, or perhaps several kilometers away, maybe hundreds or even thousands of kilometers away, as far away as another continent, depending upon the winds), where they will float down to another world like miniature paratroopers, new beings fully instructed as to their purposes, ready to begin at last their new lives. Thus Mary ascended (miraculously it seemed, invisibly) to heaven and left behind only the delicate but amazingly strong (an estimated tensile strength second only to that of fused quartz) white threads of her silk veil which unraveled and fell (as she climbed) for six weeks or so, until one mild late summer afternoon the strands of silk were observed (like the geese combing the clear blue skies) to have covered the entire earth, the light-fall of pious dreams. She too had traveled to a new world, to begin there a new life?

I shall (if I may) elaborate: we are none of us immune. We must count our blessings: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight and nine...like a cat's lives, always one too few (never too many).

For example, you got drunk that night. Just so, drinking one, two, three, four, five and more bottles of beer. It was only beer, nothing but beer, but your stomach was empty and the beers, one after another, went directly to your head, where they swished around, like water in a large empty pail.

Fortunately you weren't alone. The middle aged mother (wife of the owner of the bar), was there, with her two pubescent children, an older boy with a cracking voice and a younger girl with a pair of buds for breasts. The three of them were sitting at a square molded plastic table with a newspaper spread upon it, watching the beginning of a movie on the brand new color television set that they had recently bought with a share of the summer's profits. You stood behind them with your first beer in your hand and watched the opening scene of the film.

It was, according to the introduction—*as the long weary struggle for supremacy dragged on from year to year, and the economic ruin and distress of the land intensified, the commanders of both sides increasingly relied upon the looting of towns and villages, both for supplies and to make up for the arrears in the soldier's pay; the soldier's became, therefore, more and more mere*

*brigands, leeches sucking the blood of the countryside, and the traditions of plunder as a legitimate operation in warfare and of outrage as a soldier's prerogative were established for all time—an adventure drama set in Bohemia at the time of the Thirty Years War.*

You sipped your beer and watched the words (Book Antigua script) fade from the screen; the music merged into the sound of leather rubbing and the hooves of many horses clipping, and the camera followed a group of cavalymen, the sunlight striking their polished cuirasses, as they emerged from a deciduous forest and walked their horses to the edge of a cliff, where they stopped and looked down at a cluster of cottages with thatched roofs separated by a furrowed field from a muddy river. The lead horse snorted and shook its head, rattling its decorative bridle, and the camera zoomed in on the leader's face. He was a young man with long blond hair and high wide cheekbones. His eyes were a menthol blue and his face was smoothly shaved. Unlike the other riders he wore no helmet.

The leader adjusted his weight in his tooled saddle and cocked his head to one side and said something in a strange language (you didn't look at the bottom of the screen quickly enough to read the subtitles). The man beside him, carrying a long pike with a banner draped about its neck (the breeze fluttered the cloth while the pike man responded to the leader's question—once again you missed the subtitles—and you saw a pair of battle axes forming an inverted V above a Christian cross on one field, and a rearing lion with a streaming mane wearing a scarlet flowing cape on the other), nodded his head gravely. Simultaneously all the cavalymen jerked on their bridles and the horses made a lot of noise turning around.

You finished your beer and asked the owner's wife for another one. She scowled and rose heavily from her chair and went behind the counter and opened another bottle of beer and set it on the counter. You thanked her, picked up the beer and resumed your position behind the others.

Now the camera swung across the field and into the settlement where men wearing plain woolen doublets and breeches drawn tight below the knees busied themselves with happy chores. It was a quiet peaceful scene, complete with birds chirping in the background. Everyone wore

wooden clogs covered with leather uppers and they greeted each other with hearty shouts. The women, dressed in low cut bodices (covered by long white collars draping across the shoulders like shawls) which tapered to a point below the waist, from which the long skirts fell in folds to the ground, easily churned liquids in rough hewn wooden buckets with their thin arms hidden beneath three-quarters-length sleeves trimmed with broad turn-ups (of an immaculate cotton identical to that of the collars). A flaxen haired boy hung about the door of the carpenter's shop, inspecting a toy he had just finished carving for himself.

The music resumed on a dramatic note eclipsing the chirping of the birds and the camera turned its eye on the cavalrymen riding out of the forest and into the field beside the river. A little girl drawing water from the river saw the cavalrymen, screamed and dropped her bucket and ran towards the cluster of cottages. There was a close-up of the leader again as he fixed over his face a masked helmet which looked like a fantastic lion's head, complete with oriental eyes, small ears, a wide powerful snout and a long flowing mane. The cavalrymen drew their swords; a few held maces at the ready. A couple of riders prepared their heavy match lock muskets (priming the pan, charging the piece, ramming the powder, holding the piece with the pan guarded, the fuses slowly burning). The leader shouted something (you were so intent upon the elaborate preparation of the muskets that you missed the subtitles yet again, but you did notice the way the mask changed the leader's voice), and the men spurred their horses and charged.

The music accelerated and the camera chased the little girl as she ran, out of breath, into the middle of the cluster of cottages, screaming and crying. Everyone dropped whatever they had been doing and gathered around her. Then everyone looked in the direction of the charging invaders. There was frantic shouting as the men ran for the tools they would wield as weapons and the women and children ran for shelter. The music rose and blended with the sound of the stamping hooves. Then the action began.

It was hard to make out clearly what was happening because the camera switched rapidly from one angle or point of view to another, creating a sense of vertigo; but the peasants basically ran clumsily, scattering in every direction, while the graceful horsemen (seeming larger than life

and especially magnificent when the camera shot from a low angle emphasizing the singular blended nature of horse, man and metal) bore down on them brandishing their swords and maces and firing the muskets wastefully into the air, easily overtaking the men and stabbing them in the back or clubbing them across the head and jumping off their spirited steeds and kicking in the heavy wooden doors of the cottages with a single mighty blow of a booted foot and rushing in and grabbing the women they found huddled in the corners inside and throwing them on the floor and tearing with their powerful hands at the nonresistant fabric of the long folds of the skirts (when they could have simply raised them) and raping the women (without bothering to remove their breastplates) before the shocked and gaping children while others pillaged and set fire (tossing torches that had materialized from nowhere onto the thatched roofs of the cottages which instantaneously leaped into flame) so that in no time the entire settlement was burning, a terrific conflagration which blazes in the background of the final pursuit of the flaxen haired boy who has managed (miraculously) to escape the initial onslaught and who now runs wild-eyed like a rabbit (zigzagging) towards the river, tripping and stumbling over the enormous clods of the obviously plowed but not yet furrowed earth and nearly falling but not letting go of his recently carved toy just as the leader (whose mask seems to grin above the wild thrusting of the head and powerful neck of his—also blond—horse) raises high his gleaming sword and with a single fluid swwwwwwwwwwwooop of the tempered iron—which, being the first egalitarian metal (four to five percent of the earth’s crust is iron as compared to the relative scarcity of copper and especially tin), dramatically changed both agriculture and warfare (and consequently gave the illusion of changing as well the comparative strengths of the different social and economic classes, allowing poor men the opportunity to both arm themselves and by virtue of their now more efficient labor become less absolutely poor while remaining relatively poor, but at the same time enabling kings and even princes to arm if not maintain, as evidenced in this film, large cumbersome armies and project with these the capricious claims, decrees, personal eccentricities and ambitions of their egos and empires, thus altering as well the relationships of the individual to society [creating, in fact, the individual] and

societies vis-à-vis each other [creating the interdependencies of the functional groups known as producers, consumers and governments which would steadily evolve into the complex of powerful and established interests which operate like a circulatory system, recycling for further destruction that which has been created in order to be destroyed]), forever—blade cuts the boy's head off and sends it flying up and out and over and into the slow moving muddy water where it lands with a definitive plop, bobs once, twice, then sinks.

You drained the last (warm and frothy) of your second beer and, having decided that you had seen this movie before—or one near enough like it—you asked the wife of the owner of the bar for another beer which she reluctantly got up and got for you. Then, without so much as glancing at the television again, you took your third beer and went outside and sat at the only round molded plastic table that had been left (the season being over) on the patio.

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