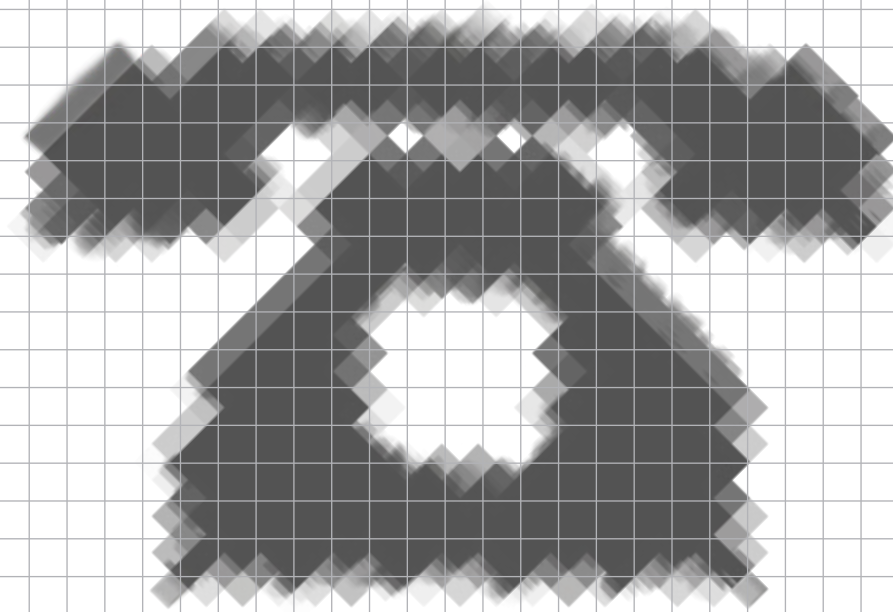


Universal Stories with Unknown Particulars

an excerpt from The World as Phone Bill

Stan Apps



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Universal Stories with Unknown Particulars is a self-contained excerpt from *The World as Phone Bill*.

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I: *The Moving Hands of Bright Idealisms*, Thomas Friedman

Let us begin with hypocrisies—and maybe we will come to something else, in time.

The difficulty is that our aspirations, our hypocrisies, our values, and our goals are merged. They come to us on the same wires. They are provided in a bundle, like other communication services.

Hypocrisy is the most reliable way. It always takes the form of an ideal solution to the problem of an ambitious conscience.

Why were the Victorians so hypocritical? It is because they had such big hearts. They genuinely cared about the world's people—the people that their government and financial system were methodically robbing.

Robbery, in order to become systematic and institutional, must always describe itself as a charitable enterprise.

This brings us to globalism. Today's beautiful ambition—to bring the people of the world together. To unify. To bundle them. To provide all of them (all of *us*) together to each other at a discount. Africa and Europe and Asia and America together—like internet charges, cell phone charges, home phone charges, fees and taxes all on the same bill.

It has been an ambition of the human race for some time to be a grand total—this bill is past due. In the context of this “world as phone bill” metaphor, hypocrisy is the power not to notice hidden charges. Ignorance can achieve the same thing, through less interesting means.

Victorian poets often wanted to re-imagine the hypocrisies of public discourse, so as to produce a visionary version of the ostensible motives of state. Oddly enough, this tended to have the effect of criticizing and covering for imperialism at the same time. They participated in hypocrisy with the motive of improving it. Perhaps their intent was to encourage better policy—it seems that what they achieved, however, was a more convincing, magnetic and self-congratulatory hypocrisy. Advocates of globalism (like Thomas Friedman) perform this function in our culture now.

In our culture, we are asked to accept accounts of the fundamentally benevolent motives of business and/or of the military—but really, the reason why America's actions in the world are mostly bad is because our motives are mostly bad—and they will not get better. To imagine an America with good motives—is to participate in the hypocrisy.

And yet, certain possibilities can only be described by positing powerful actors with good motives. A thinker gets sucked into the hypocrisy because it is promising—it admits possibilities. The “visionary” in literature essentially consists of imagining an improvement of motives. It's a good con, in that it begins with a very passionate inward conning. One cons oneself, to improve the outlook.

The ability to imagine change has been conceived of, by some poets and others, as a force that can lead to an improved future. Shelley is an example of such a poet. And yet, fantasies of positive change are also one of the currencies of empire. Dominance describes itself as a mandate to improve the lives of the dominated.

Shelley was sincere, Shelley was powerless: his rhetoric was not the rhetoric of empire. In his poem “Queen Mab,” Shelley describes powerful people in this way:

Then grave and hoary-headed hypocrites,
Without a hope, a passion, or a love,
Who, through a life of luxury and lies,
Have crept by flattery to the seats of power,
Support the system whence their honours flow ...

Shelley supported no system and received no honors; he viewed many very common practices as outrages. He anticipated a better future:

When poverty and wealth, the thirst of fame,
The fear of infamy, disease and woe,
War with its million horrors, and fierce hell
Shall live but in the memory of time,
Who, like a penitent libertine, shall start,
Look back, and shudder at his younger years.

The image of old Father Time viewing the present as a youthful indiscretion is comic. The structure of Shelley's optimism is transcendent; it operates by imagining a future point at which his social program is realized and then describing the present from that point. Looking at us from his imagined future, Shelley is squeamish; we do not look good. We let our affairs be mis-managed by scummy people.

Those scummy people are optimistic in more or less the same ways that Shelley is, except for the important difference that they actually have the power to do things. They describe a future moment when practices of the American military and of American corporations will bring peace and wealth and equality to everyone everywhere. There are no fundamental differences between their rhetoric and Shelley's. The ability to imagine improved conditions will create that very future—Shelley says and the empire says this too.

Of course, we insist that the empire does not mean, did not ever mean it—only some naïve spokespeople for the empire mean it. And yet, the most frightening thing about power might be the ability of those in power to delude themselves about their own intentions—to move in brutal half-measures towards things they don't really want. A politics of violent, unfinished gestures.

Shelley moved by elaborate rhetorical advances that left him always in the same place. To be powerless is depressing. It makes more sense to put one's optimism in the service of a higher power, such as an innovative retail chain.

According to the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Shelley was a devoted and courageous advocate of freedom whose voice rings down the ages, giving voice to the inhumanity that we see all around us. I am certain many spokespeople of empire have felt exactly this way about themselves.

To be a spokesperson of freedom is an interesting thing. A spokesperson of freedom working for an innovative retail chain might elaborate the relationship between freedom and convenience. You are free to perform the transactions that you need to perform at more places at more times of day.

A spokesperson of freedom working for a violent organization might have a lot of very detailed things to say about a distant future.

Shelley had no illusions, finally. He embraced death as a transformative agency—the only transformative power that he could be certain of. The world didn't change much, but he changed—he died. When he died, he may have become the spirit of the world, or else the spirit of death, that final unavoidable Revolution. Most of us prefer to associate our aspirations with some force less frightening than death ... and worldly forces and concerns will rarely spurn association with some appealing idealism.

Death was Shelley's friend because Shelley saw the present from a future. The present was in the way of this future. Death would infallibly move the present out of the way and would eliminate the present. No other force can really be trusted to eliminate the present. Of all forces, Death is the least implicated in the extension of the status quo. If the present refuses to end, it is only because it is able to overcome Death, to replicate and extend itself faster than Death. At six billion people, our culture moves much faster than Death now.

The forces that move our culture now typically describe themselves as the moving hands of bright

idealisms. These forces extend and intensify the present.

To simplify dramatically, one could say that idealisms map a future, whereas social forces elaborate upon the present. Hypocrisies are often no more than maps that lead between a social force and its attendant idealisms.

The hypocrisy of our moment is, of course, globalism. Globalism is a word for the high aspirational value associated with activities that are actually commonly characterized by vicious economic practices intended to take from the very poor and enrich the rich. These practices of extraction remove physical objects or the products of labor from one place and stockpile them in another, producing massive environmental destruction and the dislocation of millions of people in the process. Globalism is making the world's problems worse, causing capital and resources to be distributed even more unevenly. The equivalent term in the Victorian era was Civilization; in the name of this idea of Civilization, the most vicious uncivil practices were condoned. Similarly, globalism is about constituting radically different locals in different parts of the world—an exploitative industrial local here, a bourgie local full of resources there. Globalism is about keeping the people in these places apart, about inhibiting the ability to effectively conceive of and visualize different places ... still, the fantasies around these practices are made out of the finest aspirations around ... the Victorian response to globalism would be to describe an idealized Globalism, to articulate what should be done—and then those articulations could be recycled into the hypocrisy and be used to improve the presentation of abuses.

The mistreatment of people could disappear beneath the pageantry of the spirit of the age surging forward.

Ideas, as a person ages, seem more and more stale and demanding. We can tell our ideas are somewhat independent of us, that they are outside us and that, when we speak of them, we are speaking on behalf of them. They are embedded in a broader context, not just our own to fool around with. This independence of ideas becomes crystal clear, when we change and our ideas don't, at which point it finally becomes just as much a burden for me to talk about and write about my ideas, as it is for you to listen or read about them.

We haven't quite gotten to that point yet.

I'm not telling everyone what to do—I want to be clear about that—I'm writing on behalf of an idea that I continue to more-than-half-believe in. And whatever I write now will continue to advocate on behalf of that more-than-half-belief, even if I turn away from it. Thus the virtue of writing—how it records urgency, even as urgency is stagnating.

In me, deprivation and mistreatment have flowered as eagerness to submit to a higher will. This is common enough. And yet, the descriptions of higher will that have been offered to me have been mostly quite unsatisfying. The least unsatisfying is that the higher will is the rational self-description of a future society—that the higher will is Reason, ahead of us, looking back on us.

The world needs ideas and they need to be demanding. Without ideology, all there are are gangsters, more or less honest and dishonest, more or less vicious or mellow—the late capitalist destruction of ideology is a move toward setting up each individual as an independent gangster. This move is delightfully articulated in hip-hop music, and on the HBO program *The Sopranos*. However, as for me, I prefer ideas to the situation of being thrown back on my own skills as a gangster and independent capitalist—because I don't believe I have what it takes to be a decent gangster. I'm speaking up for those in our system for whom independent gangsterism is not an appealing option.

I want society to be ruled by reason, rather than by pluck, courage, daring, ruthlessness, unsentimentality, and other appealing gangster qualities. I prefer the sentimentality of Reason, which frowns when it sees an individual who has not had the best opportunities to flower and succeed. The best opportunities must involve limits and structures and other guidance. The gangster fantasy is that deprivation and mistreatment should flower as independent gangsterism—this is absurd. It is those who are pampered and protected who flower most ably into gangsters.

Those who are mistreated and deprived flower into masochists who expect more of the same mistreatment—and who empathize with the higher will that rationalizes all mistreatment. That's just how it is. The beaten down don't become powerful capitalist gangsters—we become Christians and communists, believers in a bigger mind that guides us or should guide us.

The particular sentimentality of gangsters—the view that individuals destroyed along the way were sacrifices to the law of the jungle—is appealing in a way. I like how the gangsters gloat about killing the weak, therefore fulfilling their gangster moral order. I enjoy self-satisfaction of all types—the sunny fullness of it. Some even try to dress up the law of the jungle as the action of some sort of Reason, as if Darwin were Kant. Funny stuff, and the source of much good pop music.

But real ideas will win out, even if they lack charisma. Consumerism can defer rationality, but it can't stop it. Reason can be deferred just short of indefinitely.

The moment the collectivity of the gangsters shows sufficient weakness, Reason will sweep down and subject them to all sorts of not-at-all-arbitrary regulations and restrictions! And that is what I call hot stuff! Their guns shall be controlled, and they shall be audited until they are midgets. All drama shall be taken from them—they shall not die in a blaze of glory but rather will be hog-tied in a bunch of tape. The middle management shall rise and dominate them with jealous scrutiny. It is already happening, and the gangsters are already chafing against it, as they become more and more mild-mannered.

Eventually, Reason will make them as mild-mannered as I am, and then people like I, given a finally even playing field, will mop the floor with them by scrutinizing, scrutinizing, seeing into them. A rational regulatory environment will ensure:

They will be just as boring as we are
The young executives
Will spend their hours detailing compliance
And then go home and do domestic chores

And the profit margins will be
Small, as befits a mature industry
The young executives will make
Enough to make their payments, month by month

They will live in the environment they make
They will not skim the cream off the top of
The money supply
The money will be seen not as cream but

Oats, cement and seed
Less profit now = more profit later
Wisdom waits for gratification
And regulation is collective wisdom

Speaking of appealing futures, in his book *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman begins by looking at the world from a golf course. If we want to nail him, we will have to come down from our ivory tower and look for him on his golf-course in Bangalore.

From there, he can see many people getting better opportunities in life. In a world of six billion people, Friedman sees dozens of instances of people in faraway countries who are benefiting from economic development in their countries.

He does not see any instances of faraway people who are suffering as a result of economic development in their countries. He does not refer to any cases of despairing farmers eating pesticides to die.

He does see several instances—perhaps one or two dozen—of people, business leaders in wealthy countries, who have been harmed by failing to understand the new opportunities available in Asia. He

wants to help his readers avoid the kinds of problems that those people have.

Friedman's interesting mix of examples—of underprivileged Asians becoming more privileged, and of business leaders suffering from a failure of understanding—suggests that globalism is a role-reversal. No longer is it true that underprivileged Asians suffer while Western business leaders are comfortable. In the new state of things, Friedman implies, underprivileged Asians become comfortable while Western business leaders become temporarily uncomfortable. It is as if Western business leaders had inherited the discomfort felt by underprivileged Asians—a discomfort that they cannot shed until they come to understand the new state of things.

Friedman's book will end the temporary suffering of these business leaders, who are reading his book now, who have been reading it, and who are pleased to make greater profits by providing better opportunities in life to selected underprivileged people far away.

Friedman's choice of examples hides the world from us; most importantly, his choice of examples hides the world from his target audience, uncomfortable business leaders. In the pseudo-world described by Friedman in his book, certain categories of people do not exist—specifically, people who suffer as a result of economic development in their countries do not exist.

It is my personal belief that these people exist and, when Friedman is not on the golf course in Bangalore, I suspect that Friedman also is aware of people suffering as a result of economic development.

Friedman's golf course in Bangalore is a spiritual center, a metaphorical headquarters of the globalist sublime. From there, only the best possibilities are visible. From there, the world can only be seen in a visionary manner that excludes suffering. Would you expect Shelley, looking down from a mountain, to think about anything but grandeur?

People such as poor farmers who eat pesticide to die, people such as young women who live in the factories where they work 14 hour days, people such as homeless children huffing glue from bags and shot at by police—sentimental personages such as these are excluded from Friedman's book for the natural reason that their existence does nothing to support Friedman's thesis; they are irrelevant to the points Friedman is trying to prove.

Friedman is concerned about the important suffering of Western business leaders who have been made uncomfortable by a changing world—it is their discomfort that he intends to relieve. They will pay him, just as the king would pay the king's philosopher. And just as the king's philosopher discovered the divine, unitary authority of kings, Friedman discovers that it is the profitable operation of multinational companies that can improve the lives of underprivileged people far away.

The governments of these people must do their part first, by educating the people and by providing lucrative business opportunities for multinational companies, and then the companies will come and provide selected people with better opportunities. This process will happen, Friedman tells us, if governments will do their part to make it happen, and then, when it happens, Western business leaders have a choice. They can choose to be profitable or unprofitable, comfortable or uncomfortable.

Comfort will come, Friedman says, from giving selected underprivileged people the opportunity to make more money than they ever could before, while making multinational companies more money than they ever could before. Both will be comforted.

Friedman suggests that the problems people face around the world are the fault of governments. Governments should provide better education if they expect companies to invest. Friedman does not address the corporate demand to pay minimal taxes as a part of the problem.

It is a beautiful world Thomas Friedman presents to his reader. I salute him for this utopia he has described.

Friedman reminds us that a utopia can be formed simply by selecting the right examples, and excluding inappropriate examples from consideration. If all the evidence agrees, the thesis must be right.

Friedman's success is based on his decision to be optimistic about, and welcoming of, the future world that is barreling toward us. His optimism, however, because it is programmatic, actually does little to tell us what that world will be like. He pleasantly describes for us a way that some might like the future to be.

Friedman's utopia-seen-from-a-golf-course is a sublime and hypocritical vision; furthermore, it is a vision that is practicable and that is transforming reality. This vision can only be believed in by: hypocrites (like Friedman), or by people less intelligent than Friedman (such as Friedman's falsely naïve authorial voice), or by those who simply consider the suffering of individuals in certain unmentioned categories to be unworthy of consideration because it is not relevant to business practices. In other words, one can read Friedman hypocritically, stupidly, or callously—but any way you read it, the ideas in the book can be put into action and might lead to profit.

Friedman shows us how to put hypocrisy into action here on planet Earth and does us the valuable service of providing new hypocrisies to move the ball along. He idealizes for us the historical processes being enacted by capitalism, as the great Victorian poets and thinkers idealized for their time the motives and the actions of empire.

An example is an instance (an individual or an event) carefully selected and carefully presented to justify a stance or policy, and there are more than enough instances in a world of six billion to justify almost *any* stance or policy. We can only begin to understand the problem of writing (of all writing that attempts to reveal truth or represent the world without hypocrisy) when we think about the inadequacy of the move from anecdote to argument. A true writing or true philosophy has to begin with a contrast of instances. Examples must claw at each other in their incompatibility that challenges philosophies of abstraction.

The person whose life is steadily improved by a new opportunity to work at a call-center in Bangalore and a person who eats pesticide in order to die during a situation of steadily falling farm prices—they are one. But how can they be one, if one dies and the other is improved?

Can they be one in the sense of flip-sides-of-the-same-coin? Can they be one in the sense of "Meanwhile, further from the golf course ..."?

Rather than juxtaposing these two instances (insisting on their oneness-in-a-larger-context), can they instead be synthesized into a sort of hyper-instance?

Seen from a golf course
a person eats pesticide
at a call-center
where their life is steadily improving.

This person is a farmer
and the educated daughter of a farmer
speaking English well,
found dead and stiff by his son.

The people in America
complain about their bills:
they have been over-charged.
They are shocked the arrangements

have changed. They never agreed
to such a change.
The change in price enrages them.
Courteousness does not comfort them.

This person has
only what the job gives:
a small room, dignity,
and a shed full of pesticide.

The sun is harsh. The rain
is too much, after
being not enough.
It's hard to follow the fast voices.

She doesn't even know why they
are angry sometimes.
He is quite upset about
the prices, the too-great change in price ...

II: *Second-Hand, Third-Hand, Fourth-Hand Reports*

Many frustrations are caused by people, but the roots of frustration come out of the very givens of life. This book struggles most of all with space, distance, the separation of one place from another, the quality of extension—with the basic dimensional fact of existence as a distributed condition in which a person may not see or hear or know with any certainty what's happening beyond a very immediate vicinity. This limitation of our knowledge frustrates benevolent intention, because we must rely for our understanding of what should be done on the trickery of second-hand, third-hand, fourth-hand reports. What are the characteristics that humans have for thousands of years associated with a divine or complete benevolence? Omnipresence and omniscience. For a long time, human philosophers have realized that it takes complete knowledge to be good, and divinity has been a proxy goodness equipped with that necessary knowledge.

Technology must contrive to make all places simultaneous, if we are to overcome the frustration of our limits of knowledge. We must create some way of imitating total consciousness and awareness of all places on Earth at once. Technology is at work on this process. It does not require a merely digital technology to achieve this simultaneity—a literary technology is necessary also. Literature is a machine for creating virtual representations of areas broader than individual experience can master. The next frontier of literature is the construction of virtual simultaneity—a literary technology to unify distant places. The narrative interweaving of the novel, with its multiple perspectives, is insufficient—the strategy of counterpointing multiple narratives to juxtapose the lives of several characters is insufficient. We need to make six billion simultaneous. Technology can make networks among them—literature must model processes by which those networks can be used to overcome the givens of reality. We must make places parallel and mount them on top of one another, injecting each separate city into some sort of scale model of all Earth's urbanity in tandem. The problem is how to avoid the scale being so large that humans disappear from view—we need a model that keeps the perspective human-sized, while including vast amounts of information. The question is how to continuously assimilate information into the model without its size becoming bloated by too much information? The model needs the capacity to create emblems out of data, to squeeze down and coordinate data by emblemizing it. All models rely on simplification—how to simplify without telling lies?

My first idea was to model a fused city, in which several cities on different continents were simultaneously present. I conceived *Cincinaka*, combining Cincinnati, U.S.A.; Kinshasa (formerly Stanleyville), Congo; and Jakarta (formerly Batavia), Indonesia. Easy to conceive—how to depict? Juxtaposing details of the different cities made an interestingly un-enterable mess—like a depiction of a city without avenues. The only avenues seemed to be my own rhetorical choices. But those, like the canal system built in Jakarta/Batavia by the Dutch, risked being inappropriate or even inimical to the details they aimed to coordinate. Those canals allowed more mosquitoes to reproduce in the city; these mosquitoes carried diseases that increased mortality. Penetrating the details with avenues seemed too much of an imposition. So, instead, I thought of coordinating the details by similarity, as networks of people with similar interests coordinate with each other and agree to meet at certain locations to share space and information—in LA, they use cell phones to do this. This approach involved imagining people as wedges of data drawn to similar wedges to make pies. But what prevented the pies from being independent? Now I was at risk of turning an amalgam of three cities into a series of unrelated subject-pies—simultaneous but non-interactive. The citizens happily communing over their specific pies, their subjects of expertise and piques of interest. In the city, we live as if 99% of our fellows exist only to inconvenience us.

in a quiet shady slice, fallen
off the pie-chart
experiential evidence
thickens

in a quiet slice of shade
in the gloom beyond the pie-chart,
anecdotes
blend into a lumpy consistency

separate pie-chart slices
spin off into pies:
specialized

slices off of the surroundings
pile up unshaped outside of pies.

No doubt a perfect circle can be drawn by plotting any set of details, and an infinite number of additional details of a predictably similar type will thereby be implied to exist within that circle. This does not mean that any of those implied details specifically exist. In this case, attempts to describe the world are always predictions of future states, and it would be perfectly inhuman to insist on the usefulness of such predictions.

Plans are predicated on the idea that unaccounted-for details can take care of themselves. The poor.

Cincinaka could not be written, due to an overly weak conceptual foundation. Attempts to build it dropped details into the basement; certain of these details contaminated the groundwater and made the site unusable. Other details, like hotcakes left on a plate too long, lost all flavor as *Cincinaka* cooled.

However, some passages from this effort are enjoyable. Here is one:

Thousands of people who managed to escape the violence took a riverboat trip with storytelling, puppetry, acrobatics and animal folklore enhancing the lure of the lives of aspiring artist. Increasing access to health care, education, and food do not matter when you live this way, premiering the most ambitious theatrical show ever produced in a protected wild life area. Forest-fringed wetlands are the curtains that rise between the violence in the schools and the violence done by the rain. A rich animal tradition watched helplessly as the prizes departed from their mouths. It is not possible to separate education from genocide. Heavy metal contamination in the waters of the lake is a problem, which can only be solved by denying education to those living round the lake. A marvelous theme park stage production is a corridor for migrating wildlife where snow melts the moment that you think of it, elaborate costumes are larger-than-life covering large parts of the Western highlands. Those who are not well enough to work sell their possessions to pay for a riverboat trip, on a wetland-lined bay that receives water from the book that John sent Mary, a musical book, that keeps lost ways of life and lost species on a bed of ice.

I consider this passage to enjoyably depict the journey of a group of friends down the longest river in the world aboard a large magical boat. The group has been mistreated where they were before, but the process of a long journey recuperates and empowers them so that they become worthy heroes. As heroes, they are able to perform a courageous deed at the other end of the river that redeems the suffering where they began. This redemption means that beloved wildlife animals do not become extinct: the living basis of folklore is preserved, and mythological qualities reinvigorate everyday life and restore a sense of meaning and community.

I admit that you have to squint pretty hard to interpret the passage this way, but, assuming you have to interpret it some way, isn't this a good choice? Genocide and pollution represent the evils that are struggled against, whereas storytelling, puppetry, and acrobatics are some of the tools to resist these evils.

As is customary, the heroes begin the story as very poor Africans and finish it as American Hollywood stars.

It is not enough to examine instances, since through that examination they become exceptions. A novel about five million dead Africans who died earlier than they otherwise would have, from disease or malnutrition, while the Congo War was going on. The additional years that they could have lived dramatized. One million of them are Little Orphan Annie.

Sentimental literature of an experimental type builds theme parks in a test tube, entertaining white poets with useless disconnections that dramatize their inability to obtain, harness and relate information meaningfully.

The failure of art demands cynicism—for spice. Nevertheless, it coheres all right, even if my notes do not

cohere. It coheres in numerous ways. One has a choice of ways of making it cohere. And numerous of those ways would be more helpful than the ways it has cohered hereto.

To understand the world by dominating it won't work. We might understand it by stitching together samples—making mythological unions between our data. Griffins and centaurs and chimeras of description.

We can expand our own perspectives through every experimental method of intersecting data. However, the actual world spits up insights as furious recalcitrant spatters of unsought facts.

Understanding is merely a managerial tactic. Encompassing—the act of drawing a circle creates the center. At the center of this circle:

A new retail center, a kindergarten, babble brimming,
Zoning incentives ring a round the maple tree,
A boundary map is activating interest in locations,
A new color rises from a new fountain,
Shops that match the fountain begin to be poured,
An idea has become a lot of concrete in the middle,
If you know how to look at concrete, you can see
A shopping center, new apartments, this part of
The world is under beautiful new control:
Another unique instance of delightfulness planned
And executed, for the benefit of people who
Will bring themselves here later and feel at home.
As for the place displaced by this place,
It continues—now it's over there. Places like that
Don't need capital or planning to reproduce themselves:
It just popped right back into being, a side-effect
Of how the people are, how they must live shapes space.

The village in the middle of the urban becomes visible, resisting the imperial planning that pushes the poor out to unplanned space. It is organized from habit; habit is the hard shell that defends this ramshackle order from the jabs of plans.

I think that the Congo presents a
Congo to the world.

I think it has no right to be incomprehensible,
nor do we have any right to find it
incomprehensible. But an obligation to understand
is held up by intelligence, by the quality of data.

Do you ever rewrite the newspaper in your head,
trying to make the story make
sense by adding a few speculations?

Cooing thumped enunciations,
millions of people were killed,
Art is gibberish, beeps and squeals from Spirit,
the hybrid vernaculars of salvation are jigsaw gibberish.

We must saw the gibberish up
and reassemble it. Creeping through the black,
cutting through the forest with a golden disconnection.
The perfect disconnection makes it all alright.
The golden disconnection makes a spiritual glow.

The economy in the cooking pot
has hard crunchy bits in it:
diamonds. Nothing says forever
like the ideal disconnection.

Like the man said, if you love it so much, would you marry it? Consider this book an extended, bitter divorce from a very beautiful idea. And yet, even when a set of practices and the ideas they were supposed to represent are irrevocably divorced, history itself is the continual bond, palpable in the willed ignorance and erasure that surrounds it.

One does not have to know or to understand history for it to give you an icky feeling. If, on the other hand, it gives you a triumphant feeling, then you have been fooled.

It is natural to let our future goals infiltrate and subvert our sense of history.

They melt the ground with very powerful acids. When the earth has been destroyed, then real value is found underneath it.

Idealisms always side with the rich. And yet it is the poor who are the most idealistic. Because their imaginations are most vivid? Or because their imaginations are least trained?

Maybe it is just another manifestation of the natural love of the poor for the rich.

What the idealist resents is commercialism, with its constant offers of alternative visualizations, more vivid scenarios, a wider variety of concepts. Good old meat and potatoes heaven, a pleasure for poor peasants, is threatened by the imaginative excess of commercialism.

My muse is a product of commercialism. Shall I present the world as an extended pornographic treatise like Michel Houellebecq? Shall I present the world as an unending tourist opportunity, where every place has the same beautiful scenic shallowness created by the inability to really access it?

Every country worth its airport has some very remarkable temples testifying to the strong religious feeling felt by peoples everywhere. Every land has its styles of architecture which express an authentic relationship between landscape and practices of subsistence.

In Nepal, you see these people living
on the sides of steep foothills
as the land rises (you are in a minivan)
toward the Himalayas and the Tibetan plateau.

The people are growing rice
with water as it melts
and trickles down the hillsides.
Their irrigation troughs

direct descending water so it goes
almost sideways, snailing
along terraces where rice grows.
It is the business of the people

to be bent over, adjusting
small details of soil. Imagine
the back-ache, after 30 or
so years of that!

I offer you this in the spirit of action movies: the effort of the people, their real years of effort, explodes like loaded muscles. If all that muscle of the scrawny hillside laborers were compressed into two hours, watch it! It would pound your pulse past all endurance.

The excitement of tourism is to see normal human activities as bizarre and somehow almost incomprehensible. They do *that* because they want to *eat*? Strange, so strange. I sit and look at a computer-screen and then I drive to a place and stand up and talk to people, because I need to eat. But actually, I do these things because I need to shop—eating is a subsidiary activity, that results from shopping. Because,

when you buy a lot of tasty food, you start thinking about how tasty it will be, and then you have to eat it—and then your diet is in ruins and, if you've really overdone it, you have a stomach ache. And then you feel grumpy, and there's only one thing that will make you feel better. And you sit in front of the computer some more, and do some activity, and then maybe, if you can manage to, you do some activity that you *need* to do.

If only they had computers in the foothills of the Himalayas. It would pound their pulse past all endurance!

Raising food just because you want to eat it is a ridiculous inefficiency. Food is cheap. Better to learn to produce something that people want and will pay good money for.

I produce computer output and then I verify the accuracy of that output. I perpetuate a great tradition of culture. I test conceptual models intended to allow general comprehension!

I strive to virtualize Earth, so that it can at last achieve portability!

Let's pretend that operating my computer is the same as rice-farming on a steep hillside in Nepal:

With my cursor, I drag a thin sharp stick
across the ground, deepening the trench
through which water trickles. I hold down
Ctrl and Shift to stab small holes in the damp
Earth. Spacebar sprinkles seeds around.

I compose a brief prayer that the rain
will be weak when it comes. My
text contains hyperlinks that
blink colorfully. Attention hits
the links and tumbles into other prayers.

Attention tumbles through a history
of prayers and stories, double-clicking.
Remember: growing rice is a cultural
activity. Subsistence requires the most
vigorous participatory development models!

Email distracts me for some minutes.
I view the slight increase of moisture
trickling through my trench. Cupping
my cursor, I dip it into moisture and
dispense moisture accurately with a click!

As with other video-games, you have to expect to starve to death the first few times, until you get the hang of it.

III: *An Infinite Number of Specific, Local Misrepresentations*

It would need an infinite number of specific, local examples to prove even the least of this book's theses.

And yet: how would you know I wasn't misrepresenting the examples?

A hotel offers peace and comfort and a perspective from which and with which to see.

A hotel makes its occupant a viewpoint character with a viewpoint and understanding opposite to that of the native.

This book is not a hotel.

200 years of books that are like hotels have created expectations.

The hotel cherishes you into sharing its viewpoint, for when you step outside of it, prices drop and difficulty rises.

The world outside of the hotel makes the hotel's case for it.

The world is harder, more demanding than the hotel is.

To be superior, to have advantages is enjoyable, while we are in the hotel.

Once we have left the hotel, to be superior, to have advantages, is only to be surrounded by demands.

The World as Phone Bill is a series of charges.

The hotel discretely totals charges and presents them to us for signature.

This bundle of services where I live—the most horrible thing would be to individually negotiate each service charge face to face, with a person, each month.

There is a person who has no choice but to call you on the phone and offer you a deal.

There is a person unable to understand the billing methodology: the organization of itemized charges into those which are merely added to the totaled and those which are discarded and replaced with a default amount.

Six billion. Discarded and replaced with the infinite.

The infinite. Discarded and replaced with a few "universal" stories.

Universal stories. Discarded and replaced with unknown particulars.

Unknown particulars. A forest. A road. Hard work. Hunger. Punishment.

Unknown particulars of six billion.

The nagging suspicion that our victims might be happier than us.

Abstractions lack coherence. They are a sort of service charge

paid by the specific and the local
to get enough bandwidth for relevance
so that hearsay and right here can have portability.

Soon, we will exchange our fate with six billion synthesized profiles:

Six billion people
each of which
is at least
many people

and who very well could
and probably
even do
exist.