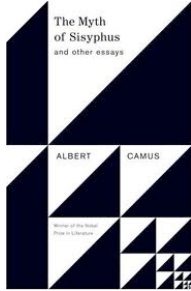
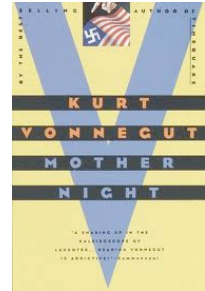


The Pleasure of the Text

[He] put the noose in the ash can, where it was found the next morning by a garbage-man named Lazlo Szombathy. Szombathy actually hanged himself with it—but that is another story.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Mother Night*



No one lacks a reason to commit suicide.

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

I

August 18, 1993

Dear Giles,

Thanks again for your hospitality. The trip back from Minnesota was completely uneventful and mercifully short. Now Florida appears all the better for having left it.

But I haven't been able to stop thinking about Frank's brother's suicide. I certainly don't need to tell you that there was no love lost between Frank and me. When you brought him to Florida with you on your visit, I frankly did not find the antagonism between us very relaxing, and though I never actually told you, I was more than a little pissed at you for asking him along. After all, I hadn't seen you in five years, and with all those philosophical arguments, we hardly had a chance to talk. It was then, come to think of it, that we began to lose touch with one another. Perhaps it was because I was once an Ayn Rand disciple myself (until I outgrew it, like puberty) that I had so little patience with someone like Frank, who at thirty should have known better than to fall for all that stupid "with charity toward none" horseshit. Forgive me Giles. I know you too were sorely tempted by "objectivism" [sic] yourself at the time, though I haven't heard a word about it from you since.

Did you know that, ironically enough, I have been chased for several years now by a former student—a groupie, you might say—who, despite being twelve years my junior, is completely infatuated with me and is—of all things—an Ayn Rand disciple, determined to convert me and, at the same time, seduce me! If I were to put this in a piece of fiction, no one would believe me, would they? Or the critics would deem it a pale imitation of Walker Percy.

I knew, too, or at least I had guessed, your motives in bringing Frank to Florida with you, though I wasn't sure (and still am not sure) that you knew them yourself. Since you had looked up to me for some time—made me into a kind of mentor—you wanted to set up some sort of "firing line" in which the two poles (the two hemispheres, if you will) of your own psyche would fight it out before your eyes, and then you could choose the winner and have a ready-made, sanctioned, credible philosophy to adopt at will. You got your wish. I can't recall now any of your visit except for the debate—in my mobile home, in bars, in the car, on the beach. Maybe it was the bad weather Florida thoughtlessly dumped on us that week which made the atmosphere so full of tension—that plus my antipathy for Rand. But I suspect my hostility to Frank had another source—his own not-so-secret motives in coming to Florida.



If you wanted me to endorse Rand for you, Frank, it seemed, wanted me—why me?—to bless his affair-in-progress. For God's sake, he brought it up only hours after getting off the plane, overcome by the oh-so-typical contemporary urge to confess, even to perfect strangers ("Confession is the new handshake," as one observer of our mores quipped). Ayn Rand meets the "me decade"! But unrequited love for a student—especially a thirteen-year-old—somehow did not strike me as quite sane in a middle school teacher committed to leading a life governed totally by rational self-interest. To Frank, however, this Lolita complex evidently did not contradict any of the other planks in his Randian platform, and (as I'm sure you recall) he seemed deeply disturbed that I would not ratify the whole campaign and send him back to Minnesota with a clear conscience. What ever did happen to Frank and his Annabel Lee? (Wasn't her name "Tammy" of all things?) You know, I hadn't thought about this whole episode in years—not until my visit and his brother's suicide—but for some unexplained reason I feel the need to clear the air about this now.

Nevertheless, I wish I could have been more help to Frank and family. A suicide is never easy to understand, but one like that—justified (inspired by?) a novel—seems doubly perplexing. (It almost seems like something from a postmodernist novel and smacks of metafiction!) And yet I was no help at all. It has been twenty years since I read *The End of the Road*. (During a period in my life, coincidentally, when I too was quite suicidal. That was the year, as I recall, when I

forgot about my own birthday until late in the evening and spent most of the day in a fit of Weltschmerz, lying in bed reading A. Alvarez' *The Savage God*. I was obsessed with Plath, Sexton, Hart Crane, Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Pavese, *The Possessed*, and literary suicide in general. You must remember—I talked about it often enough.) All I could remember is that *The End of the Road* was depressing and "existential" and that it convinced me further—as I always wanted to be convinced at the time I read it—of life's meaninglessness, for I used to find despair so exhilarating in those days—my angst period! Frank's brother, I presume, must have been undergoing something similar, and *End of the Road* pushed him over the edge.

You know, I can even recall now searching out books that might be similarly fatal for me and was very hopeful of finding one. I was quite taken with William Burroughs' aspiration to write so powerfully and graphically (about his experiences with heroin) that the text would be fatal to read and was rather disappointed, after reading *Naked Lunch*, et al, that he hadn't succeeded.

This is, I realize, no time for comedy, but for some reason this all brings to mind that diabolical Monty Python routine about a lethal joke which the British army uses in the trenches in W.W. I after translating it into German—killing several translators in the process!

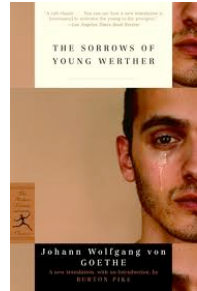
Still, it was disappointing I could not use my expertise to offer some sort of explanation. After all, like most in our profession in this anti-book culture, I am regularly overwhelmed by the sense that what I do is meaningless to the culture at large. (A colleague's child, asked once by a fourth grade teacher to tell what his daddy did "for a living," informed her that his father was a doctor. Asked what kind—obstetrician? surgeon? proctologist?—he answered, profoundly, "the kind that can't help anybody." Ah yes.) But I could have helped Frank, if only I had remembered the book better. All those years of literary study, my acutely trained hermeneutical skills, my ability to interpret texts to reveal hidden meanings, could have been brought to bear on a fiction not in order to promote a vigorous class discussion, not to pass my orals, not to grind out another meaningless essay for *John Barth Quarterly* or a talk at a twentieth century literature conference, not for the pleasure of the text—but to decipher a "literary" suicide, to help a brother and a family to understand the incomprehensible. But my memory failed me. It had been implicated in a senseless death, was, in effect, an appendix to a suicide note, and demanded an interpretation. Yet I could not give one.

Only three weeks now until school starts again. In the meantime, I'm going to do some reading—*The End of the Road*, of course. Perhaps I will have some answers soon.

Your friend (still)

Daniel Kirilov

PS It just occurred to me that this whole thing may not be without precedent. Didn't Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* inspire a vogue of suicide in late 18th century Europe? I must research this.



||

August 20, 1993

Dear Daniel,

Why haven't you written? I haven't heard from you since the wonderful night we spent together back in June. I miss you and find myself fantasizing about you and that night often.

I have tried to call you twice, but both times your wife answered and I hung up immediately. Couldn't you at least call me? I'm home with Ashley all day on Tuesday and Thursday and Sam is at work until 6.

When can we see each other again? I need you so badly.

Have you had a chance to read any more of the Rand books I loaned you? I was pleased to learn you loved *Atlas Shrugged*—it's my bible, you know. I was so excited to talk with you about it.

We should be together and you know it. I was thinking recently about when I had you for Freshman Comp and how I would dream about you as my lover. I really can't believe my dreams came true. But not often enough. We could teach each other so much!

Love,

Brett

PS A thought for the day (from *The Virtue of Selfishness*):

It is not men's immorality that is responsible for the collapse now threatening to destroy the civilized world, but the kind of moralities men have been asked to practice. The responsibility belongs to the philosophers of altruism. They have no cause to be shocked by the spectacle of their own success, and no right to damn human nature: men have obeyed them and have brought their moral ideals into full reality.

It is philosophy that sets men's goal and determines their course; it is only philosophy that can save them now. Today, the world is facing a choice, if civilization is to survive, it is the altruist morality that men have to reject.

I will close with the words of John Galt, which I address, as he did, to all the moralists of altruism, past or present.

"You have been using fear as your weapon and have been bringing death to man as his punishment for rejecting your morality. We offer him life as his reward for accepting ours."

III

August 21, 1993

Dear Dan,

Thanks for writing so candidly. I'm glad you told me (at last) your real feelings about my visit to Florida (though you didn't really tell me much I hadn't already figured out). I am sorry. Frank and I were never very close after. I didn't approve of his affair with Tammy either—and it was consummated, by the way, though miraculously no one at school except for me found out, even though it resulted in an hysterical, pregnant teenager and an ugly abortion. And I fell away from Rand and her ideas, too, though Frank became even more of true believer. He made all his decisions, planned everything in his life, on the basis of her philosophy. And I grew very bored with his consistency.

But I shouldn't speak ill of the dead, for Frank killed himself yesterday (yes, him too)—at an in-service day at school (shot himself in the teacher's coffee room). We're all quite stunned. He too left a suicide note, and it read (I think I am quoting exactly): "What is the reason for this? In a sense I am Joe Morgan." It seems that, since his brother killed himself ten days ago, Frank had himself read *End of the Road*.

(A copy was found in his desk at school.) The following passage was underscored twice:

It is a demoralizing thing to deal with a man who will see, face up to, and unhesitatingly act upon the extremist limits of his ideas.

Why? Who is Joe Morgan?

Dan, are you sure you should read *The End of the Road*?

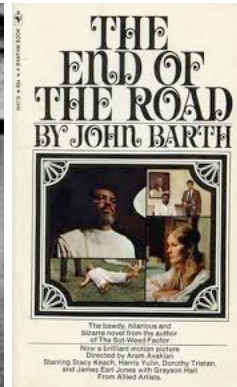
I can't write any more now. In a week I will be back in the classroom, alas, teaching prescriptive grammar to 7th graders.

Take care,

Giles Rylander

IV

August 21, 1993



Dear Giles,

Yesterday I read *The End of the Road*, almost in one sitting. It is a book about the disintegration of personality in our time ("judging from my clearest picture of myself, the individual is not individual at all, any more than the atom is really atomistic; he can be divided further, and subjectivism doesn't become intelligible until one finally locates the subject") and the immobilization of the will which results ("I simply ran out of motives," admits Jacob Horner—the book's narrator—"as a car runs out of gas").

But it is as well a condemnation of anyone who, like Joe and Rennie Morgan, thinks life can be rationally contained and defined—can be made intelligible within

the categories established by a single subject. (While Jacob Horner knows that "the same life lends itself to any number of stories," the Morgans are so deluded as to believe that merely one version can explain all the world's—and the self's—irrationalities: the delusion of Ayn Rand, is it not?) On the horns of this dilemma the book impales us ("my muscles screamed to act; but my limbs were bound like Laocoon's—by the serpents Knowledge and Imagination, which grown great in the fullness of time, no longer tempt but annihilate"). Its final word: "Terminal." Why is it that this reminded me I hold a "terminal degree"?

Just as anyone reading *Moby-Dick* usually identifies either with Ishmael or Captain Ahab, is either a friend of imagination and storytelling, or of rational rebellion and the search for ultimates, the reader of *End of the Road* probably inclines toward either Jacob Horner or Joe Morgan as spokesman, but only to his own hazard. I, for instance, saw myself in Jacob (or Jacob in myself) and the view was quite, quite terrifying.

At one point Horner tries to explain why he has not committed suicide.

Only the profundity and limited duration of my moods kept me from being a suicide: as it was, this practice of mine of going to bed when things got too awful, this deliberate termination of my day, was itself a kind of suicide, and served its purpose as efficiently. My moods were little men, and when I killed them they stayed completely dead.

Jacob does not always have moods however; some days he is "without weather."

On these days, Jacob Horner, except in a meaningless metabolistic sense, ceased to exist, for I was without a personality. Like those microscopic specimens that biologists must dye in order to make them visible at all, I had to be colored with some mood or other if there was to be a recognizable self to me. The fact that my successive and discontinuous selves were linked to one another by the two unstable threads of body and memory; the fact that in the nature of Western languages the word *change* presupposes something upon which the changes operate; the fact that although the specimen is invisible without the dye, the dye is not the specimen—these are considerations of which I was aware, but in which I had no interest.

On my weatherless days my body sat in a rocking chair and rocked and rocked and rocked, and my mind was as nearly empty as interstellar space.

Giles, *End of the Road* has, I fear, made me weatherless as well—returned me to a mental climate very like the one I once lived in when I first read the book years ago.

And it's so much easier now to be done in *End of the Road*, after all, is a pre-Valium book, not of our generation which simply does not believe in moods and seems determined at all cost to "have a nice day," even if the existential price we pay is the elimination, the extermination, of mood—the dye that makes us visible in the first place. In 1970 I was often depressed; now I get depressed most about being depressed—metadepression!

I realize this doesn't exactly explain Frank's brother's death. After all, I did not know him. But perhaps (I speculate) he wanted to actualize, to make "real," his invisibility, wanted to be seen for what he was, *nothing*; and *End of the Road* was his inspiration. ("There are sudden, apparently inexplicable suicides," writes R. D. Laing, "that must be understood as the dawn of a hope so horrible and harrowing that it is unendurable.") If it had been Frank himself who had committed suicide after reading the novel, I could offer a more definitive explanation. For Joe Morgan is a kind of portrait of Frank's type. Though Morgan, unlike the Randians, acknowledges the impossibility of "objectivist" values, he does live and act entirely on the basis of a (self-derived) presumption of absolute consistency. He chooses an illusion and lives it to the hilt, even if it means pushing his wife into continuing an affair in order to justify his logic. "It is a demoralizing thing," Jake says of Joe, "to deal with a man who will see, face up to, and unhesitantly act upon the extremist limits of his ideas." And this is precisely what I found so irritating about Frank as well.

I fear *End of the Road* might be a very deadly mirror for Frank, one in which he might see himself denuded of rationalization. He might see what a monomaniac he was (is?), might see his hypocrisy—his infatuation with that girl, for example—and his arrogance—his "delusion that intelligence will solve all problems" (Horner on Morgan) become, in the book's reflection, a Gorgon's head.

I speak from experience.

Yours in hypocrisy,

Daniel

V

August 24, 1993

Dear Giles,

Your letter arrived today. Daniel evidently wrote you two days ago, and I guess your letters crossed in the mail.

Daniel is dead Giles. Yesterday I found him in his study with a gun still to his head. Why?

He left a suicide note on his desk calendar. It said something about that book you two talked about when we were in Minnesota. (A copy lay on his desk.) Please explain this to me. I have asked everybody at the university to help me understand, but I just have no answers at all.

I looked though his copy of the book. Strangely, he had underlined only one passage, which reads:

My eyes, as Winckelman said inaccurately of the Greek statues, were sightless, gazing on eternity, fixed on ultimacy, and when that is the case there is no reason to do anything—even to change the focus of one's eyes. Which is perhaps why the statues stand still. It is the malady cosmopsis, the cosmic view, that afflicted me. When one has it, one is frozen like the bullfrog when the hunter's light strikes him full in the eyes, only with cosmopsis there is no hunger, and no quick hand to terminate the moment—there's only the light.

What on earth does this mean?

Help me,

Nancy Kirilov-Zimmer

VI

Department of Language and Literature
East Florida State University

Sept. 1, 1993

MEMORANDUM

From: Edward Knickerbocker, Chair

To: Vernon Gemmell, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

Re: Prof. Kirilov's death

As you probably know by now, Daniel Kirilov's tragic death was in fact a suicide. No one, including his wife, is certain of the reason. Our only clue is a mysterious one. He left a suicide note which said merely "Read *The End of the Road* and you will understand."

The End of the Road, it appears, is a 1958 novel by John Barth, set in a state teacher's college in Maryland, which deals with the conflict between a grammar teacher and a history professor over the former's affair with the latter's wife. More than that I do not know at the moment (it is one of those books I never got around to), though I plan to read the novel myself this weekend in pursuit of some answers.

The whole department is, of course, in shock. We thought very highly of Daniel (as you know) and were almost certain to nominate him for tenure this year. We will miss him very much.

We should try to keep this news quiet, don't you think? It definitely would not be good for the university if students were to know the cause of his death, and I would hope—morale being what it is—that it does not even become common knowledge among the faculty.

We need to talk soon about the 7% enrollment drop this fall and about hiring a replacement for Kirilov.

VII

College of Arts and Sciences
East Florida State University
September 2, 1993

MEMORANDUM

From: Vernon Gemmell, Dean
To: Edward Knickerbocker, Chair, Language and Literature
Re: Prof. Kirilov's replacement

My sincerest condolences to you, the department, and Prof. Kirilov's wife. (I have already called her to offer my sympathy and will, of course, be at the funeral.)

This came as a real shock to me personally.

I am sorry to inform you, however, that there will be no replacement for Kirilov in the foreseeable future. As you know, there is a state-mandated freeze on hiring, and this pertains to suicides as much as resignations and retirements, Yes, the bottom line takes precedence even here. Consultation with my budget assures me that there is not sufficient precedent budgetarily to proceed with hiring a new faculty member at this point in time.

Please let me know when (if) you've made any sense out of Kirilov's death. Is it possible, he died, so to speak, "in the line of duty"? I intend to read *The End of the Road* myself as soon as possible and have already bought a copy.

VIII

Department of Language and Literature
East Florida State University

Sept. 9, 1993

MEMORANDUM

From: Mary Lou Voelker, Acting Chair
To: Vernon Gemmell, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
Re: Prof. Knickerbocker's death and the status of the department

I thank you again for naming me chair. I am honored by your support in this difficult time. With only a third of the department now left (I am the only tenured member remaining), it will be very hard to continue our program adequately. We need to find

eleven new faculty and to overcome seemingly insurmountable problems of morale. This year's 5% pay cut didn't help matters any.

We still do not entirely understand the suicides of Dr. Knickerbocker and the others, though they were all clearly linked to Kirilov's death and to that novel he implicated in his suicide note (which made the book a campus best-seller). I can't imagine the fuss it has caused. Of course, I'm an eighteenth-century scholar myself and never was able to find anything of worth in these modern novels. I have myself read *The End of the Road* and found it tired, silly and pretentious. My best guess is that we are witnessing an epidemic of a particularly virulent strain of Faculty Burnout.

We must meet soon to plan out a course of action for rebuilding the department.

IX

College of Arts and Sciences
East Florida State University
Sept. 18, 1993

MEMORANDUM

Fr: Mary Lou Voelker, Acting Dean

To: Elmer Richardson, President

Re: the College in the wake of Dean Gemmell's recent death

I look forward to our meeting on Friday, as we begin to plan the management of the College under my leadership. With the Language and Literature Department now reduced to only part-time faculty, and a sense of doom the order of the day, we must plot a strategy for returning the university and the college to an even keel in the wake of the troubled waters spawned by all these suicides.

The identity crises and subsequent deaths engendered by that stupid book seem to have abated at last. I'm happy to report that we now have a department, hired entirely by me, which, however temporary it may be, is more committed to Alexander Pope than to the folly of postmodernist metafiction.

Nevertheless, I have included with this memo a copy of Barth's novel for you to read. (We have several extra copies lying around.) Perhaps you can make sense out of all these suicides. I hope you, with your keen analytic mind, can succeed where others have failed.