

Edward Hopper

Edward Hopper (1882-1967) painted the independence and the loneliness of 20th-Century America. He was a realist in the days when most painters tended toward the abstract. Yet his paintings incite the imagination far more than the works of any abstract expressionist. His enigmatic images force the viewer to wonder what is going on:

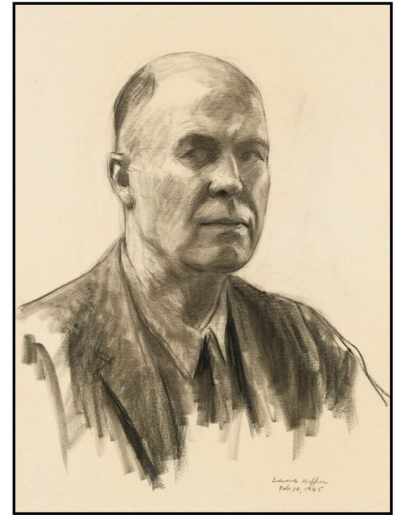
Hopper was neither an illustrator nor a narrative painter. His paintings don't tell stories. What they do is suggest—powerfully, irresistibly—that there are stories within them, waiting to be told. He shows us a moment in time, arrayed on a canvas; there's clearly a past and a future, but it's our task to find it for ourselves. (Block, 2016, p viii).

More than any other painter, Hopper has inspired writers to find the stories and meanings behind his paintings. This post summarizes his life, describes his working methods, and presents some of his pictures together with the writings they have stimulated.

Early Life

Hopper was born in Nyack, a town on the Hudson River some 25 km north of the upper end of Manhattan (Levin, 1980a, 2007). He decided early to become an artist and studied at the New York School of Art and Design in Greenwich Village, where he was taught by William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri, among others. Hopper considered Thomas Eakins his artistic hero.

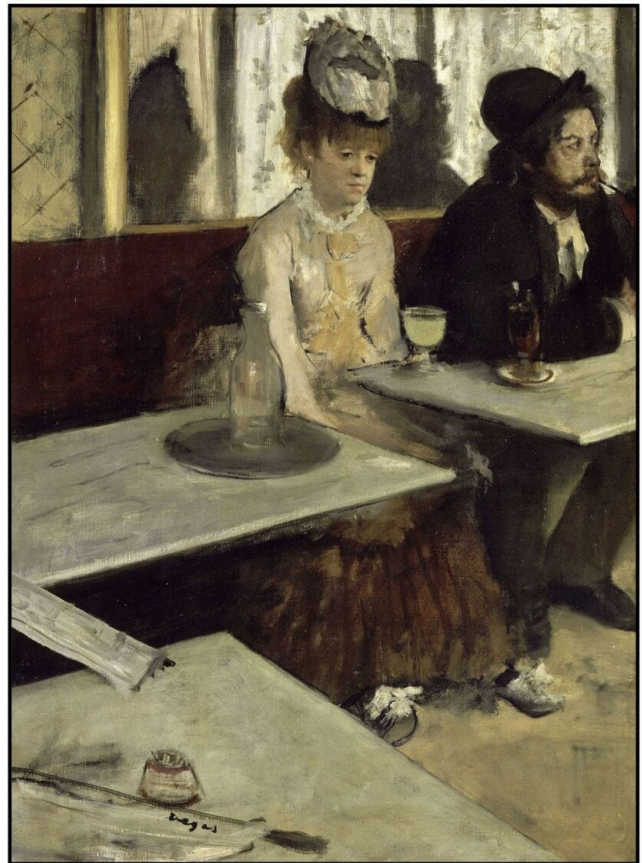
The 1903 self-portrait, illustrated on the left below, shows the conscientious young student. The others are from 1930, when he was becoming successful, and from 1945 after he had become famous.



In 1906 Hopper made his first trip to Paris, where he stayed for almost one year, making occasional journeys to other cities in Europe. He returned for two further shorter visits in 1909 and 1910. In Paris, he visited the museums, attended classes, and sketched and painted *en plain air*. The illustration on the right from the graphic biography by Rossi and Scarduelli (2021) was derived from a 1907 photograph of the young student sketching (Levin, 2007, p 68).

Hopper was influenced by the impressionists, in particular Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas (Kranzfelder, 2002, p 150). His later painting *Automat* (1927) shows similarities in mood and

structure to Manet's *The Plum Brandy* (1877) and to Degas' *The Absinthe Drinker* (1876):



Another influence was Eugène Atget who had photographed the empty streets of Paris (Llorens & Ottinger, 2012, p. 263). Since his camera required long exposure-times, Atget chose to photograph early in the morning before there were any people moving around in the streets. His haunting images foreshadow Hopper's lonely city-scenes. Walter Benjamin in his *Little History of Photography* (1931) remarked that Atget's photographs sometimes seem to portray the "scene of a crime." The same can be said of many of Hopper's paintings.

The ongoing modernist revolution in Paris had no effect on the young American. Hopper paid little attention to the post-impressionists (Van Gogh, Cézanne and Gauguin), and was apparently unaware of the current work of painters like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse.

One of the last paintings from Hopper's time in Europe was entitled *Soir Bleu* (1914). Various characters interact on a café terrace:



On the left is a *macquereau* (French: mackerel, slang for "pimp"). In the center, a garishly made-up prostitute attempts to entice a client from a table where three men are seated:

someone who appears from his beret to be an artist, a soldier with epaulettes on his uniform, and a clown in full make-up and costume. On the right a bourgeois man and woman survey the scene. One is tempted to consider Hopper as the clown, out of place and without voice among the French. Three of the figures are smoking: the clown, the pimp and the artist. This may suggest something similar in their livelihoods: they all survive by selling to the rich and powerful: the couple on the right and the soldier. Hopper exhibited the painting when he returned to New York, but it was never sold and stayed in storage at his studio until his death.

The painting's title may come from a poem *Sensation* (1870) by Rimbaud, which in its second verse talks of being mute like the clown.

*Par les soirs bleus d'été j'irai dans les sentiers,
Picoté par les blés, fouler l'herbe menue :
Rêveur, j'en sentirai la fraîcheur à mes pieds.
Je laisserai le vent baigner ma tête nue.*

Je ne parlerai pas ; je ne penserai rien.
Mais l'amour infini me montera dans l'âme ;
Et j'irai loin, bien loin, comme un bohémien,
Par la Nature,—heureux comme avec une femme.

Summer's deep-blue evenings I will go down the lanes,
Tickled by the wheat-berries, trampling the short grass:
Dreaming, I will feel the coolness at my feet.
I will let a northern wind bathe my bare head.

I will not stir my tongue; I will think of nothing.
Yet love infinite shall at once mount in my soul;
And I will go far, very far, like a gypsy,
Through Nature,—enchanted as with a woman.
(translation by Gregory Campeau)

Back in New York, Hopper was unable to sell more than an occasional painting. He therefore supported himself by

providing illustrations for magazine stories and advertisements. For a while he learned etching with Martin Lewis. From these studies, he developed a better sense of how light plays on surfaces, especially at night. He also began to define spaces more distinctly than the impressionists that he had hitherto been following.

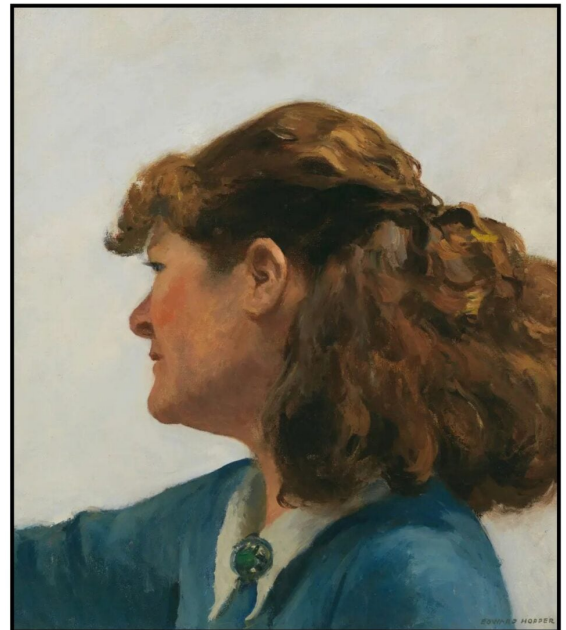
In 1913, Hopper moved into the top floor of Number 3, Washington Square North, Greenwich Village. This was his studio and residence for the rest of his life. The following illustration shows the building, the roof-top view from the top floor (Levin, 1985) and Hopper's 1932 painting *City Roofs*:



Jo Nivison

In the summer of 1923 on a painting trip to Gloucester, Massachusetts, Hopper re-encountered Jo Nivison, who had been

a fellow-student at the New York School of Art and Design. They both painted water-colors and on their return to New York, Nivison was instrumental in getting Hopper's work exhibited. They enjoyed each other's company and were married in 1924. Both were 41 years old. They were physically and psychologically different: he was 6 ft 5 inches while she was just 5 ft; "she was gregarious, outgoing, sociable and talkative, while he was shy, quiet, solitary, and introspective" (Levin, 2007, p 168). The following illustration shows a 1906 portrait of: *The Art Student Miss Josephine Nivison* by Robert Henri, a photograph of Jo and Edward (from the 1930s), and a 1936 painting of *Jo Painting* by Hopper.



Edward painted and Jo took care of things. She modelled for his figure paintings, and kept meticulous records of his paintings in a set of notebooks. She sometimes rebelled against her help-mate status, and urged her husband to promote her own artistic career. There were arguments, some of which degenerated into physical fights. Nevertheless, their marriage lasted until Edward's death in 1967. Jo died a year later, leaving all her husband's unsold paintings to the Whitney

Museum of American Art. The museum also accepted her paintings, but many of these were discarded. Jo Hopper was not given the recognition that she deserved (Colleary, 2004; Levin, 1980b, 2007, pp. 717-728; McColl, 2018).

Working Methods

Although Hopper worked *en plein air* in France and during his summer excursions to New England, most of his pictures were painted in the studio from sketches made *in situ*. His images are thus based on reality but tempered by the imagination. The perspectives are altered; the surfaces are simplified and flattened; the colors are changed to what they might have been rather than what they were. His 1946 painting *Approaching a City* shows the rail lines of the Metro-North Railroad entering the tunnel at 97th Street to travel under Park Avenue to Grand Central Station. The painting provides a heightened representation of what a traveler might experience coming into a city for the first time. The illustration below shows the painting together with contemporary (Conaty, 2022, p 13) and more recent (Levin, 1985) views of the scene.

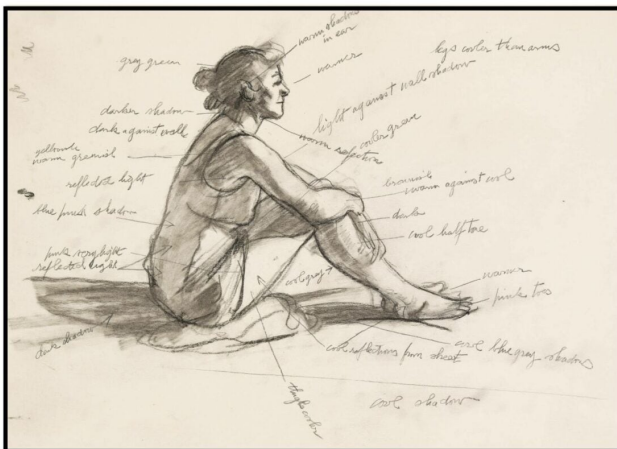


The perspective of the painting would only be possible from

the level of the rail-lines. Hopper has tried to see from the point of view of a passenger in a train rather than a pedestrian on Park Avenue. Even if the graffiti were erased, the opposite wall is (and was) not as it appears in the painting. Hopper has flattened its texture and removed the cables. The buildings above the wall are not those on Park Avenue, either now or when the painting was made. Conaty (2022, p 13) remarks

Here. the building types – from the nineteenth century brownstone to the modern industrial structure at the far left – suggest the passage of time in the histories that coexist, pictured as a single mass of forms seen from the train track below.

The illustration below shows Hopper's 1954 painting *Morning Sun*. The preparatory sketches show both the general layout of the room the effects of the bright morning light, and a more accurate representation of the model (Jo) with extensive details about shading and color:



The Lonely City

Although Hopper painted many different subjects, he is best known for his pictures of lonely urban surroundings. The most recent exhibition of his work at the Whitney Museum focuses on his depiction of New York City (Conaty, 2022).

The 1930 painting *Early Sunday Morning* shows a deserted New York Street. Though long considered to represent 7th Avenue in

Greenwich Village, recent evidence has pointed to a source on Bleeker Street (Marcum 2022). The painting has a wonderful visual rhythm: the repetition and variation between the different units and their windows reminds me of the stanzas and rhymes of poetry.



John Updike (2005 p 199) describes the painting:

Early Sunday Morning is a literally sunny picture, with even something merry about it: bucolic peace visits a humdrum urban street. We are gladdened by the day that is coming, entering from the right, heralded by the shadows it throws. The glow on the sidewalk is picked up by the yellow window shades. The barber pole is cheerful, the hydrant basks like a sluggish, knobby toad. But the silent windows, especially the darkened big shopwindows, hold behind them an ominous mortuary stillness. The undercurrents of stillness threaten to drag us down, even as the day dawns. The diurnal wheel turns, taking the sun on one of its sides. But the other side, the side where sun is absent, has its presence, too, and Hopper's apparently noncommittal art excels in making us

aware of the elsewhere, the missing, the longed-for. He is, to use a phrase generally reserved for writers, a master of suspense.

The painting takes liberties with the shadows. Neither 7th Avenue nor Bleeker Street run directly east-west, and the morning sun could not cast shadows so long and so parallel to the buildings in either place. As noted by the poet John Hollander (in Levin 1995 p 43), the long shadow on the sidewalk is especially mysterious:

Long, slant shadows
Cast on the wan concrete
Are of nearby fallen
Verticals not ourselves.
Lying longest, most still,
Along the unsigned blank
Of sidewalk, the narrowed
Finger of shade left by
Something, thicker than trees,
Taller than these streetlamps,
Somewhere off to the right
Perhaps, and unlike an
Intrusion of ourselves,
Unseen, long, is claiming
It all, the scene, the whole.

A striking aspect of the painting is its overwhelming silence: the calm before or after the storm of normal life. Ward (2017, p 169) remarks

Hopper's paintings are uniquely silent, conveying a sense of unnatural stillness. The silence is more active than passive, mainly because it suggests little of the calmness, tranquility, or placidity commonly associated with it. Hopper's silences are tense-hushed decorums maintained with terrific strain.

Probably Hopper's most famous painting is *The Nighthawks* (1942), wherein a man and a woman sit at the counter of an all-night diner. They are served by a young waiter and observed by a solitary man at the other end of the counter. The diner is brightly lit; outside it is dark. The streets are deserted: it is likely long past midnight. We sense the couple's anxiety and we are grateful for the light.



Hopper may have based the painting on a restaurant near the intersection of Greenwich Avenue and 7th Avenue (now Mulry Square). More likely it is an amalgam of various diners in the area. The title apparently comes from the beak-like nose of the man sitting with the woman.

The poet Mark Strand (1994, pp. 6-7) described the general effect of the picture:

The dominant feature of the scene is the long window through which we see the diner. It covers two-thirds of the canvas, forming the geometrical shape of an isosceles trapezoid, which establishes the directional pull of the painting, toward a vanishing point that cannot be witnessed, but must

be imagined. Our eye travels along the face of the glass, moving from right to left, urged on by the converging sides of the trapezoid, the green tile, the counter, the row of round stools that mimic our footsteps, and the yellow-white neon glare along the top. We are not drawn into the diner but are led alongside it. Like so many scenes we register in passing, its sudden, immediate clarity absorbs us, momentarily isolating us from everything else, and then releases us to continue on our way. In *Nighthawks*, however, we are not easily released. The long sides of the trapezoid slant toward each other but never join, leaving the viewer midway in their trajectory. The vanishing point, like the end of the viewer's journey or walk, is in an unreal and unrealizable place, somewhere off the canvas, out of the picture. The diner is an island of light distracting whoever might be walking by—in this case, ourselves—from journey's end. This distraction might be construed as salvation. For a vanishing point is not just where converging lines meet, it is also where we cease to be, the end of each of our individual journeys. Looking at *Nighthawks*, we are suspended between contradictory imperatives—one, governed by the trapezoid, that urges us forward, and the other, governed by the image of a light place in a dark city, that urges us to stay.

Night makes us aware of our insignificance. A café can fend off these feelings. The older waiter in Hemingway's story *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* (1933) notes how his café provides an elderly customer with some sense of security in the night:

It is the light of course but it is necessary that the place be clean and pleasant. You do not want music. Certainly you do not want music. Nor can you stand before a bar with dignity although that is all that is provided for these hours. What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it

needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was *nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada*. [nothing and then nothing and then nothing]

Strong (1988) remarks on the similarities between the isolation of Hopper's images and the loneliness of Robert Frost's poems. Hopper read and admired Frost's poems. Jo Nivison painted a picture of him reading Frost in 1955 (Levin, 1980b). Frost's poem *Desert Places* (1934) ends:

And lonely as it is, that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less –
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars – on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

There is something essentially American about the lonely individualism – the internal desert places – of Hopper, Hemingway and Frost.

Ecphrasis

Ecphrasis (Greek: words about) is the verbal description of a work of art, either real or imagined, expressed in vivid poetic language (Heffernan, 2015; Hollander 1988, 1995; Hollander & Weber, 2001; Panagiolidou, 2013). Ecphrasis is concerned with the effects the art on the viewer whereas "interpretation" deals with the what and how of these effects (Carrier, 1987).

Perhaps more than any other artist, Hopper has stimulated the imagination of poets and writers. Poems and stories written in response to his paintings have been collected in several anthologies (Block, 2016; Levin, 1995; Lyons et al., 1995),

and individual poets have composed whole books inspired by his images (Farrés, 2009; Hoggard, 2009; Strand, 1994). The following are three examples of Hopper's images and the poetry and prose that they have evoked.

Hopper's 1921 etching *Evening Wind* shows a nude woman about to lie down in bed as the wind blows the curtain into the room. The viewer feels that he is in the same room as the woman, and this intimacy recalls Degas' paintings of women bathing. The Hopper website suggests that the sudden interruption of the wind might be akin to the appearance of a god, like the annunciation to Mary or the shower of gold that fell upon Danae.



Robert Mezey (Levin, 1995, p 24) describes the etching in a beautifully constructed sonnet:

One foot on the floor, one knee in bed,
Bent forward on both hands as if to leap
Into a heaven of silken cloud, or keep
An old appointment – tryst, one almost said –
Some promise, some entanglement that led
In broad daylight to privacy and sleep,
To dreams of love, the rapture of the deep,
Oh, everything, that must be left unsaid –

Why then does she suddenly look aside
At a white window full of empty space
And curtains swaying inward? Does she sense
In darkening air the vast indifference
That enters in and will not be denied,
To breathe unseen upon her nakedness?

Hopper's 1939 painting *New York Movie* depicts an usherette at one of the grand movie theaters in New York. She is standing beautifully and pensively near the side exit.

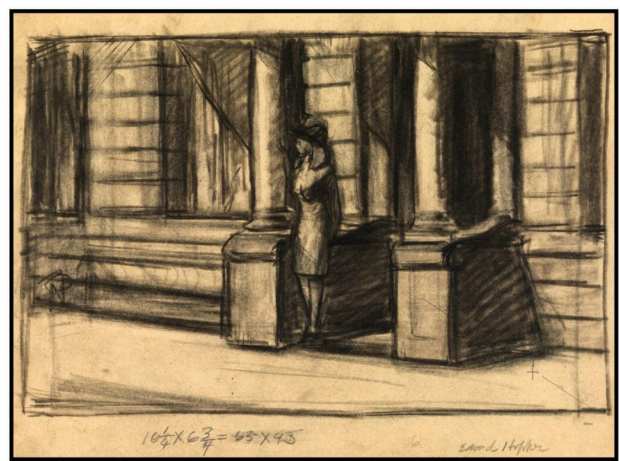


Leonard Michaels (Lyons et al, 1995, p 3) wonders about who she might be:

Of course, she wasn't going anywhere. I mean only that there was drama in the painting, a kind of personal story, and it was more engaging, more psychologically intense, than the movie on the distant blurry screen, a rectangle near the upper left corner of the painting, like a window in a dark room. The usherette isn't looking at that movie, isn't involved with any movie drama, any mechanical story told with cuts and fades while music works on your feelings. Her drama is mythical, the myth of Eurydice doomed to wait at the edge of darkness. The red flashes in the shadows of the painting are streaks of fire and streams and gouts of blood. Eurydice stands at the edge of Hades waiting for Orpheus.

This movie theater, like many others in Hopper's day, is called the Orpheum.

The 1943 painting of *Summertime* shows a young woman in a thin dress standing at the door of a New York building. She is about to face the day. She feels warm but a cooling breeze blows the dress against her body.



James Hoggard (2009) imagines Hopper talking about his painting:

It's good you noticed, if you did
A number, I'll say, have not come close
This one's a nude, the clothes a guise,
a mask, a witty, illusory stab
at idiot propriety – imagination strips
everything bare, as I've done here:
the nipples and heft of breasts in view
and the screaming delight of thighs
rising toward the truth between them,
as suggested by the curtain's cleft –
all this a celebration of my mood,
and my mood trumps anything that's yours

This lass, who looks sweetly nubile now,
is Jo, my wife, whose age has been reduced
by the cleverness of my brush and paint
I've stripped her nearly bare, but I
have also preserved defiant ghosts
in the willful set of her swelling lips

The tensions and songs here are mine
You can do with your own what you will

Homage in Film and Photography

Hopper's work has had a large influence on the visual arts as well as on poetry. Many of Hopper's paintings depict large ornate 19th-Century houses – often standing isolated from other buildings. One such picture is *House by the Railroad* (1925). According to Levin (1985) this was likely partially based on a house in Haverstraw just north of his home in Nyack (lower left of the illustration below). This house is across the street from the railway: Hopper often compressed the distances

between things in his paintings. The Mansard roof and central tower and columned porch were also found in other houses that Hopper painted. These houses defiantly insists on their isolated existence.



Variations on this house have appeared in several movies: most importantly Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Terrence

Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978). These sets are shown in the illustration above (lower middle and lower right).

Many photographers have been profoundly influenced by Hopper's pictures. Phillip Lorcia diCorcia photographs isolated people in urban settings: his images suggest what Hopper might have seen he had lived a further fifty years (Llorens & Ottinger 2012, pp. 306-309). Even more recently, the photographer Richard Tuschman has recreated many of Hopper's paintings in photographs. The illustration below shows Hopper's 1926 painting *Eleven a.m.* together with Tuschman's *Woman at a Window*, 2013. The chair has changed from blue to pink and the model now wears heels. Most importantly her face is visible.



Empty Rooms

Hopper was always intrigued by the play of light in empty rooms. His 1951 painting *Rooms by the Sea*, shows an empty room leading through an open door to the sea. The image derives from the Hopper's studio in Truro on Cape Cod. The door does not directly open onto the sea: Hopper has compressed the space. The main room in the painting is completely bare. On the left, however, another room can be glimpsed with a couch, a chest-of-drawers, and a painting on the wall. Hollander (2001, pp. 72-25) suggests that the two rooms might represent the memories of the past and the presentiments of the future.



One of Hopper's late paintings *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963) is devoid of detail. The room contains nothing but the light. The

stark simplicity almost approaches the abstract, though Hopper would insist that the image is still tied to reality.



Strand (1994, pp. 57-58) remarks:

In the later painting, *Sun in an Empty Room*, there is nothing calming about the light. It comes in a window and falls twice in the same room—on a wall close to the window and on a slightly recessed wall. That is all the action there is. We do not travel the same distance—actual or metaphorical—that we do in *Rooms by the Sea*. The light strikes two places at once, and we feel its terminal character instead of anything that hints of continuation. If it suggests a rhythm, it is a rhythm cut short. The room seems cropped, as if the foreground were cut away. What we have is a window wall, with the window framing the highlighted leaves of a nearby tree, and a back wall, a

finality against which two tomblike parallelograms of light stand up-right. Done in 1963, it is Hopper's last great painting, a vision of the world without us; not merely a place that excludes us, but a place emptied of us. The light, now a faded yellow against sepia-toned walls, seems to be enacting the last stages of its transience, its own stark narrative coming to a close.

Last Things

Hopper's last painting, *Two Comedians* (1965) portrays two actors taking their bows on a stage raised high above the audience. The actors are the artist and his wife. Representing himself as a comedian refers back to his earlier painting *Soir Bleu*. The illustration below shows the painting together with Scarduelli's impression of the elderly couple in their studio (Rossi & Scarduelli, 2021).



The Portuguese poet Ernest Farrés (translated by Lawrence Venuti, 2006) imagines Hopper's comments on the painting

Perhaps it's the costume
that lets me laugh,
or smile as it were –
for me they've been the same

Perhaps it's the clown's disguise
that lets me be
looser than I usually am
strutting cock-proud now,
goofy-eyed at a crowd,
the illusion of a crowd
no one sees but you and me

Clowns, we move toward stage's edge,
a place I've made like a roof's edge,
with threat or promise of a fall

But the moment seems sweet,
our domestic wars almost done,
and white-clad and foolscapped,
we seem blest as we press
toward the last edge we'll meet,

our lyrical selves always in France,
our final days just bibelots:
Nous sommes, Jo et moi, les pierrots

Final Words

Hopper painted the real world, but he allowed his imagination to interact with his perception. Conaty (2022, p 14) remarks that he often felt torn between working from the fact and improvising upon what he saw. Hopper argued against abstract expressionism, insisting that art should always have its source in "life." The following is his 1953 statement on art from the short-lived magazine *Reality* (quoted in Llorens & Ettinger, 2012, p 275):

Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the

artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world. No amount of skillful invention can replace the essential element of imagination. One of the weaknesses of much abstract painting is the attempt to substitute the inventions of the intellect for a pristine imaginative conception. The inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm and does not concern itself alone with stimulating arrangements of color, form, and design. The term "life" as used in art is something not to be held in contempt, for it implies all of existence, and the province of art is to react to it and not to shun it. Painting will have to deal more fully and less obliquely with life and nature's phenomena before it can again become great.

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Story of Job

Everyone knows the story of Job. A righteous man is tested by God. All that Job owns is taken away, all his children are killed, and he is struck down by disease. Job's friends advise him to seek God's forgiveness since he must have somehow offended Him. However, Job insists on his own righteousness. He does not repent. He demands an explanation for why he is being unjustly punished. An angry God appears unto Job in a whirlwind. He proclaims His workings to be far beyond the understanding of Job. He talks of Behemoth and Leviathan. He castigates Job's friends. He grants Job happiness and prosperity. He neither explains nor justifies what happened.

Everyone knows the story of Job. No one fully understands its meaning.

The Land of Uz

איש היה בארץ־עוץ
איוב שמו והיה
האיש ההוא תם וישר
וירא אלהים וסר
מִרְעוֹ:

There was a man in the land
of Uz, whose name was Job;
and that man was perfect
and upright, and one that feared
God, and eschewed evil.

(Job 1:1)

Thus begins the story of Job. The text was likely written in the 6th or 5th Century BCE (Crenshaw, 2011; Pope, 1965). Job was a righteous man who worshipped God. The God he worshipped went by the name “Elohim” (אלהים). Job was not Jewish; his god was not Yahweh (Sawyer, 2011). Job made all of the appropriate sacrifices. A Byzantine illumination from the 11th Century CE (Papadaki-Oekland, 2009) shows him making a sacrifice and receiving a blessing from the hand of God.



No one is sure about the Land of Uz (Pope, 1965). Some have suggested that it is equivalent to the land of Edom to the south and east of Israel. This fits with the idea voiced in the later *Testament of Job* written in the 1st Century BCE (James, 1897) that Job was descended from Esau, the son of Isaac who ceded his birthright to his brother Jacob, and left to found the nation of Edom. Others have suggested that Uz is located in the Hauran district of Southern Syria. Arabic traditions consider the town of Sheikh Saad (also called Karnaim or Dair Ayyub – “monastery of Job”) as the home of Job and site of his tribulations. A third possibility is raised in one of the Dead Sea scrolls called the *War Scroll*, which mentions Uz as one of the lands “beyond the Euphrates” (Vermes, 2000, p. 124).

I prefer the third explanation since stories similar to that of Job existed in the ancient literature of Mesopotamia – the land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. The oldest story, written in cuneiform on clay tablets, comes from Sumer and may date from 2500-2000 BCE (Pritchard, 2011, pp 352-357; Kramer, 1956/81, Chapter 15). In this story the author laments his undeserved suffering. Ultimately, God hears his cries and

The Hebrew *Book of Job* is a far more complex and poetic creation than these Mesopotamian stories. The writer of Job may have heard these tales during the period of the Babylonian Captivity (597-539 BCE), and worked them into a poetic whole then or on his or her return to Jerusalem. The *Book of Job* does not directly mention the exile of the Jews. However, it might subtly reflect the idea that the people of Israel were for a while completely forsaken by their God.

Maimonides (1190, Chapter 22) considers the Land of Uz a fantasy. He points out that “uz” is the Hebrew verb “take counsel.” The name Uz is therefore an exhortation to study well this story.

... its basis is a fiction, conceived for the purpose of explaining the different opinions which people hold on Divine Providence.

Job’s name is as ambiguous as the land he lived in. On the one hand, it might derive from the root ‘yb meaning “enmity”; on the other hand, it might come from the root ‘ab indicating “repentance” (Pope, 1965). Is Job the enemy of God, or His repentant servant?

The Council of the Gods

After introducing us to its main character, the *Book of Job* takes us to Heaven where God has called a council. Amongst those gathered is one they call the “Adversary” (Alter, 2010) or the Satan, someone who is part the Lucifer of Isaiah, and part the Devil of later scriptures. The following is an illustration of the council from a Byzantine manuscript of the 11th century CE. God is represented only by his hand; the Adversary is dark and has been defaced.



God indicates his servant Job to the Adversary:

Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? (Job 1:8)

The Adversary claims that Job is only good because God treats him well. If he were not so well taken care of, he would curse God to his face. God refuses to believe this, and allows the Adversary to take away all that Job has, and ultimately to strike Job himself.

The Ruination of Job

The Adversary arranges for all Job's holdings to be stolen or killed and for his children to die. Job is bereft but curses not God. He accepts his fate in a verse that has become the focus of the Judeo-Christian funeral rites (Eisenberg & Wiesel, 1987, p 13).

Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1: 21).

Although Job is not Jewish, this verse comes from the Jewish tradition. The Lord whose name is blessed is Yahweh.

Ultimately the Adversary strikes Job with a terrible disease. Job's wife urges him to curse God, but he rebukes her. Covered with boils he sits disconsolately "among the ashes" (Job 2:8). The Greek Septuagint and the 14th Century Wycliff Bible translate this as a "upon a dunghill," but this appears poetic license.

From ancient times human beings in mourning have covered themselves with ashes to signify bereavement and repentance. Ashes are particularly significant in Jewish history – the ashes of the first temple destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, the ashes of the second temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, and the ashes of the millions of Jews murdered and cremated by the Nazis in the 20th Century CE. Dust and ashes go back to Genesis. Adam is expelled from Eden with the words "dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3:19), and Abraham admits to God that he is "but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27). Dust and ashes return later as the final words of Job.

The peace and prosperity of Job and his family at the beginning of the story is well characterized in the first of William Blake's illustrations for the *Book of Job* (Blake, 1821/1995). The cataclysm leading to the death of his children is the subject of his third illustration:



Job's Comforters

Three friends of Job – Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar – come to comfort him in his grief. They spend seven days and seven nights in silence with him. Only when Job finally speaks do they say anything. This is the way that those in mourning should be comforted: visitors should allow the bereaved to be quiet, and only speak when he or she initiates conversation.

After Job begins to talk, however, multiple debates follow. These form the bulk of the Book of Job – Chapters 3 to 27. Job describes the injustice of his situation. His friends attempt to show that it must in some way be his own fault. Job and his friends go through multiple exchanges, which are portrayed in exquisite Hebrew poetry, quite unlike the prose that describes the story of Job's downfall.

Job begins by cursing the day of his birth. For this I shall use the translation of Stephen Mitchell (1987), which is more colloquial than the King James Version:

God damn the day I was born
and the night that forced me from the womb.
On that day—let there be darkness;
let it never have been created;

let it sink back into the void.
Let chaos overpower it;
let black clouds overwhelm it;
let the sun be plucked from its sky.
Let oblivion overshadow it;
let the other days disown it;
let the aeons swallow it up.
On that night—let no child be born,
no mother cry out with joy.
Let sorcerers wake the Serpent
to blast it with eternal blight.
Let its last stars be extinguished;
let it wait in terror for daylight;
let its dawn never arrive.
For it did not shut the womb's doors
to shelter me from this sorrow.

Job's curse is remarkably similar to that of Jeremiah the prophet who lamented the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian Captivity (Eisenberg & Wiesel, 1987, p 60).

Cursed be the day wherein I was born: let not the day
wherein my mother bare me be blessed.
Cursed be the man who brought tidings to my father, saying,
A man child is born unto thee; making him very glad.
(Jeremiah 20:14-15)

Job's friends attempt to demonstrate to Job that what has happened to him is just. He must have sinned in some way to warrant his misfortune. The illustration below shows Blake's view of Job's comforters casting accusing fingers at their friend. In the background is a large stone monument. Blake placed his land of Uz on the Salisbury plain.



Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar believe firmly in the idea that God rewards the good and punishes the evil. Job must therefore have sinned in some way. Their belief in Divine Providence is clearly expressed in the first of the *Psalms*:

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.

And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.

The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.

Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor

sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish.

Eliphaz' first reply to Job restates this idea of divine justice:

Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent? or where were the righteous cut off?

Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same.

By the blast of God they perish, and by the breath of his nostrils are they consumed. (Job 4:7-9)

Eliphaz then recounts a dream (Job 4:12-21) that warns us not to question the justice of God (Blakes illustration is shown on the right. In 1815 Lord Byron wrote some lyrics for *Hebrew Melodies* that were composed by Isaac Nathan (Byron, 1815; Cochran, 2015). One of these lyrics was a translation of the dream of Eliphaz:

The face of immortality unveiled—
Deep sleep came down on every eye save mine—
And there it stood,—all formless—but divine;
Along my bones the creeping flesh did quake;
And as my damp hair stiffened, thus it spake:

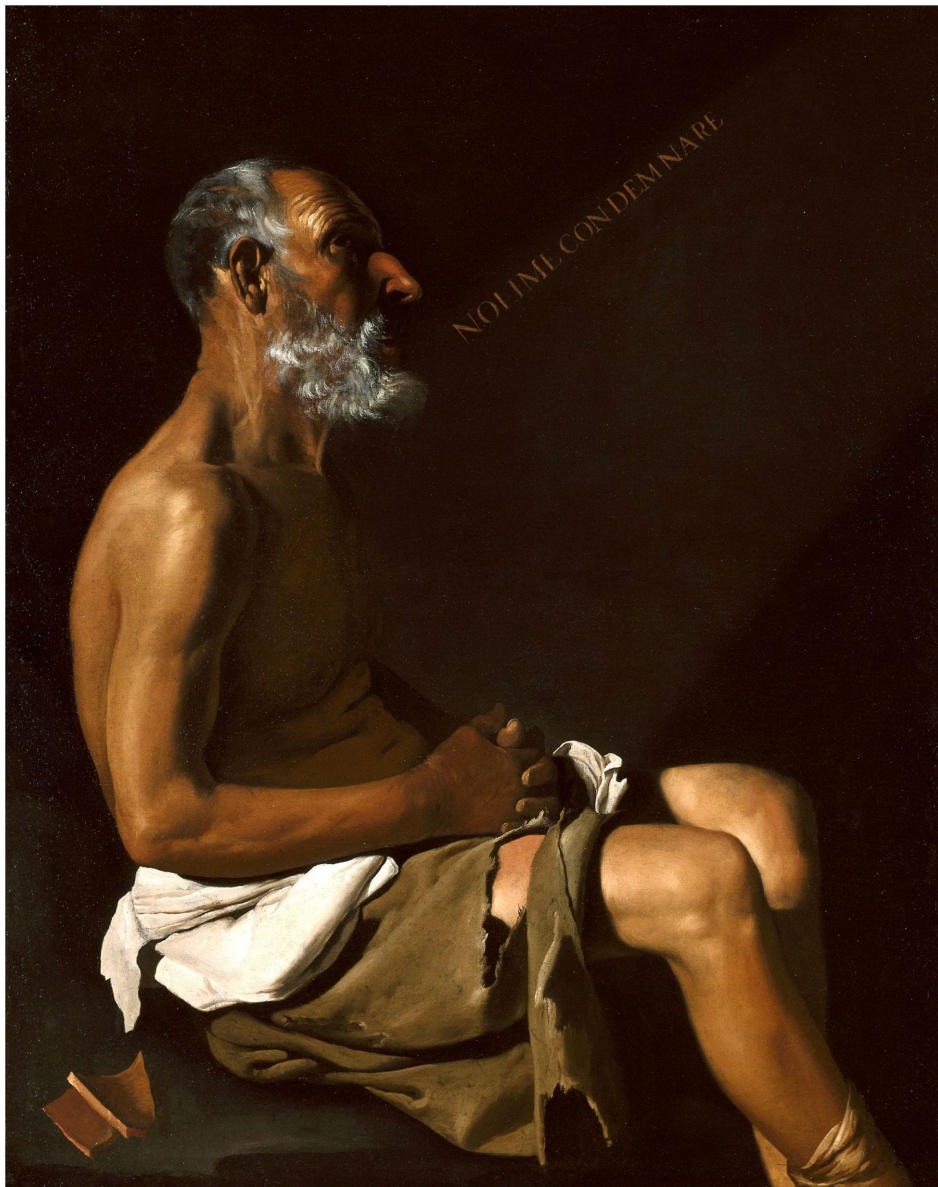


'Is man more just than God? Is man more pure
Than He who deems even seraphs insecure?
Creatures of clay—vain dwellers in the dust!
The moth survives you, and are ye more just?
Things of a day! you wither ere the night,
Heedless and blind to wisdom's wasted light!'

Nathan's music is not memorable. In 1854 the violinist Joseph Joachim wrote *Hebrew Melodies for Viola and Piano*. His music presents an impression rather than a setting of Byron's poems. The sound of the viola suits the pathos of Job. The following is the ending to the second movement played by Anna Barbara Düttschler and Marc Pantillon:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Hebrew-Melodies-II-Grave-ending.mp3>

Job insists that he has done no wrong and that his suffering is therefore unjust. He demands that God confront him with his sin. The illustration below shows a representation of Job attributed to an unknown Spanish painter from the early 17th Century. Some have suggested that the painter might actually have been the young Velasquez (Terrien, 1996). Job says unto God "Noli me condemnare" – "Do not condemn me" (Job 10:2).



Only do not two things unto me: then will I not hide myself from thee.

Withdraw thine hand far from me: and let not thy dread make me afraid.

Then call thou, and I will answer: or let me speak, and answer thou me.

How many are mine iniquities and sins? make me to know my transgression and my sin. (Job 13: 20-23)

Job describes the transience of human life in verses that recall *Ecclesiastes*, and remonstrates that God should judge him rather than pity him:

Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble.

He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not.

And doth thou open thine eyes upon such an one, and bringest me into judgment with thee? (Job 14:1-3)

Then he asks God not to deprive him so much during his brief time on earth that he not be able to accomplish something:

Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass;

Turn from him, that he may rest, till he shall accomplish, as an hireling, his day.

For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease.

Though the root thereof wax old in the earth, and the stock thereof die in the ground;

Yet through the scent of water it will bud, and bring forth boughs like a plant. (Job 14:5-9)

Sins of Omission

After a while Job's insistence on his own innocence becomes tiresome. No one is perfect. Indeed, as Wiesel points out a true *Tzadik* ("righteous one") would never proclaim his own goodness (Wiesel & Eisenberg, 1987, p 32). Even if he has done no wrong, he may not have done sufficient good. In one of his speeches (Job 22), Eliphaz accuses Job of not giving water to the weary or bread to the hungry. Job does not immediately reply to this rebuke. Later (Job 29-31) he insists that he always helped the poor and the orphans. But was this sufficient? Job remained rich and the poor remained poor.

Wiesel retells a story from the Midrash that attempts to explain why Job's appeals to God are initially met with

silence (Wiesel & Eisenberg, 1987, p 22-23). When asked by Moses to “let my people go,” the Pharaoh consulted three counselors: Jethro, Billam and Job. Jethro urged the Pharaoh to agree, Billam rejected the proposal, and Job stayed silent. The Midrash insists that when faced with the suffering of others one must not remain neutral. Not to attempt to prevent evil is as great a sin as the evil itself.

The Redeemer

The debates continue between Job and his friends. At one point, Job calls upon a redeemer or a “vindicator” to bear witness to his righteousness.

Why do ye persecute me as God, and are not satisfied with my flesh?

Oh that my words were now written! oh that they were printed in a book!

That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!

For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth:

And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God (Job 19: 22-26)

Christians have taken this passage as a prophecy of Christ. George Frideric Handel set the last two of these verses for soprano in his *Messiah* of 1741. The Christian interpretation does not make sense. According to Christian teachings, Christ came to save the sinners not to vindicate the righteous.

Who then is this “vindicator”? Job is appealing to someone in God’s entourage to serve as his advocate. In his *Answer to Job*, Jung (1956/2010) suggests that Job’s god has many aspects. The very name of God – Elohim – is in the plural. God is both good and evil – Satan is as much a part of him as Christ. God is both knowing and unknowing. According to Hebrew traditions, Wisdom or Sophia was part of God from the

beginning. In the Proverbs Wisdom describes herself as being with God from before the creation of the universe:

The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old.

I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was.

When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water.

Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth:

While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world.

When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth:

When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep:

When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth (Proverbs 8:22-29)

Christians often take this as indicating that God the Father and God the Son were together from the beginning. This fits with the idea that Christ was the word or *logos*, a concept similar to wisdom. However, this is not the meaning of the idea in the Hebrew bible and Christ is not the advocate to whom Job calls.

The *Book of Job* also contains a full chapter devoted to Wisdom (Job 28). Many commentators believe it to be a later interpolation. However, it fits nicely at the end of the disputation between Job and his comforters:

Whence then cometh wisdom? and where is the place of understanding?

Seeing it is hid from the eyes of all living, and kept close from the fowls of the air.

Destruction and death say, We have heard the fame thereof

with our ears.

God understandeth the way thereof, and he knoweth the place thereof.

For he looketh to the ends of the earth, and seeth under the whole heaven;

To make the weight for the winds; and he weigheth the waters by measure.

When he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the lightning of the thunder:

Then did he see it, and declare it; he prepared it, yea, and searched it out.

And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding. (Job 28 :20-28)

After Job makes his final statement of innocence, he is rudely interrupted by Elihu, a brash young man who cannot understand why foolish old Job does not recognize the justice of God. Most commentators consider this section of the book (Chapters 32-37) to be a later interpolation. One possibility is that it is the work of a young scribe who, when copying the initial version of book, became frustrated with Job's refusal to acknowledge justice and inserted more argument for the benefit of the reader. Wiesel (p 390) remarks that some Talmudists have suggested that Elihu might be Satan in disguise, muddying the waters of the argument.

Yahweh's Response to Job

After Elihu's diatribe, God suddenly appears to Job. Yahweh – this is indeed the one true God – describes the creation and maintenance of the universe. This exuberant paean to the wonders of the world is expressed in some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible.

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee,
and answer thou me.

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?
declare, if thou hast understanding.

Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who
hath stretched the line upon it?

Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid
the corner stone thereof;

When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of
God shouted for joy?

Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as
if it had issued out of the womb?

When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick
darkness a swaddlingband for it,

And brake up for it my decreed place, and set bars and
doors,

And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here
shall thy proud waves be stayed? (Job 38:1-11)

On the left below is William Blake's illustration of the
appearance of God in the whirlwind, and on the right is his
image of the sons of God. In 1930 Ralph Vaughan Williams set
this latter image to music as part of his *Job, a Masque for
Dancing*. This particular piece is called *Pavane for the Sons
of Morning*, a slow and stately dance appropriate to the
majesty of creation.



https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/vaughan_williams_job_pavane_sons_morning2020.mp3

The Patience of Job

Many different interpretations have been provided for the story of Job. The most common focuses on the patience of Job. In the Epistle of James (5:11) we have

Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.

The idea is that if we are patient everything will turn out fine. In the 2011 movie *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* the hotel manager Sonny (Dev Patel) claims "Everything will be all right in the end and if it's not all right, then it's not yet the end." This saying has been attributed to John Lennon, but it is probably just

an old Indian proverb, similar to the thought of *Ecclesiastes* 7:8:

Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.

The *Testament*

of *Job* and the mention of *Job* in the *Qur'an* (sura 21:83) both stress

the idea of *Job's* patience and God's mercy in his time of adversity. Joseph

Roth's novel *Job* (1931) tells the story of a good and pious Jew from the

Pale of Settlement who undergoes much suffering but is finally rewarded in his old age.

The Justice of God

The interpretation of *Job* as a man who patiently awaits the mercy of God misses the great poetic center of the book. The debates between *Job* and his friends deal with theodicy – the justice (*dike*) of God (*theos*). If God is just then righteousness should be rewarded and evil should be punished. This is not the case. Suffering occurs without regard to innocence or guilt.

The term "theodicy" originated with Leibniz's book *Theodicy* (1710), based on his discussion of the problem of suffering with Queen Sophie of Prussia. The understanding of suffering for those who live in comfort differs from the experience of those who survive in poverty (Guttierrez, 1987). Leibniz argued that God chose to create a world with as much good in it as possible. Though this entailed some concurrent evil, the optimal world contained much more good than world completely devoid of evil. Leibniz' idea that this is the "best of all possible worlds" was ridiculed by Voltaire in *Candide* (1759).

The philosophical problems concerning God and justice have been discussed for centuries (Draper, 1989; Laato & de Moor, 2003; Hume, 1799; Illman, 2003; Larrimore, 2013, Chapter 4; Sarot, 2003; Surin, 1986; Tooley, 2015), and are beyond the scope of this posting. The main problem of theodicy has to do with the concept of God as an omnipotent and omnibenevolent entity. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1799), David Hume states the basic trilemma of theodicy, attributing it to Epicurus:

Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil? (Section X)

Whence then is evil? The question of evil became acute during the 20th Century with the Holocaust (Wollaston, 2011). How could God have allowed this to occur? In his memoir *La Nuit* (1958), Elie Wiesel recounts how in Auschwitz he took Job's part and railed against God. He later described how certain great Talmudic masters convened a rabbinic court in Auschwitz to indict the Almighty for failing to protect His people (Wiesel, 1980). After hearing witnesses, and following due deliberation, the court pronounced a verdict of guilty. After a brief but profound silence, the judges moved on to evening prayer. Wiesel (1978) later wrote a play about *The Trial of God* (1979), though he distanced it from his experience by placing it in the fictional Ukrainian village of Shamgorod in the immediate aftermath of a pogrom that happened there three centuries before.

MacLeish's 1958 play *J.B.* tells the story of the complete ruin and ultimate redemption of a successful American businessman. In a framing story, two out-of-work actors using masks play the parts of God ("Mr. Suss" from Zeus) and Satan ("Nickles" from "Old Nick", an ancient name for the Devil, perhaps coming from "Old Iniquity"). In the Broadway debut these roles were played by Raymond Massey and Christopher Plummer (illustrated on the right). Hume's question about the omnipotence and omnibenevolence of God is presented in in Nickles' song



I heard upon his dry dung heap
That man cry out who cannot sleep:
"If God is God He is not good,
If God is good He is not God;
Take the even, take the odd,
I would not sleep here if I could
Except for the little green leaves in the wood
And the wind on the water."

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/nickles-song-x.mp3>

In *A Masque of Reason* (1945), the American poet Robert Frost has God discuss with Job the meaning of his story. The portrait on the right shows the poet in full didactic mode as photographed by Yousef Karsh in 1958. As Frost points out, the story of Job brings to an end the idea that a Divine Justice rewards and punishes each individual based on his or her behavior. We are not guaranteed our just deserts:

I've had you on my mind a thousand years
To thank you someday for the way you helped me

Establish once for all the principle
There's no connection man can reason out
Between his just deserts and what he gets.
Virtue may fail and wickedness succeed.
'Twas a great demonstration we put on.
I should have spoken sooner had I found
The word I wanted. You would have supposed
One who in the beginning was the Word
Would be in a position to command it.
I have to wait for words like anyone.
Too long I've owed you this apology
For the apparently unmeaning sorrow
You were afflicted with in those old days.
But it was of the essence of the trial
You shouldn't understand it at the time.
And it came out all right. I have no doubt
You realize by now the part you played
To stultify the Deuteronomist
And change the tenor of religious thought.
My thanks are to you for releasing me
From moral bondage to the human race.
The only free will there at first was man's,
Who could do good or evil as he chose.
I had no choice but I must follow him
With forfeits and rewards he understood—
Unless I liked to suffer loss of worship.
I had to prosper good and punish evil.
You changed all that. You set me free to reign.
You are the Emancipator of your God,
And as such I promote you to a saint.

Job is indeed commemorated as a Christian Saint in the Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

A Scent of Water

In his discussion of theodicy in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1799), Hume concludes that the forces that

drive the universe are neither benevolent or malevolent. Rather the original source of all things is indifferent, and has no more regard to good above ill than to heat above cold, or to drought above moisture, or to light above heavy. (Section XI).

These thoughts are remarkably similar to those of Marvin Pope in the conclusion to his introduction to *Job* (1965, p lxxvii)

Viewed as a whole, the book presents profundities surpassing those that may be found in any of its parts. The issues raised are crucial for all men and the answers attempted are as good as have ever been offered. The hard facts of life cannot be ignored or denied. All worldly hopes vanish in time. The values men cherish, the little gods they worship—family, home, nation, race, sex, wealth, fame—all fade away. The one final reality appears to be the process by which things come into being, exist, and pass away. This ultimate Force, the Source and End of all things, is inexorable. Against it there is no defense. Any hope a man may put in anything other than this First and Last One is vain. There is nothing else that abides. This is God. He gives and takes away. From Him we come and to Him we return. Confidence in this One is the only value not subject to time.

But how can a man put his faith in such an One who is the Slayer of all? Faith in Him is not achieved without moral struggle and spiritual agony. The foundation of such a faith has to be laid in utter despair of reliance on any or all lesser causes and in resignation which has faced and accepted the worst and the best life can offer. Before this One no man is clean. To Him all human righteousness is as filthy rags. The transition from fear and hatred to trust and even love of this One—from God the Enemy to God the Friend and Companion—is the pilgrimage of every man of faith. Job's journey from despair to faith is the way each mortal must go.

The description does not differ much from the scientific view of Nature (e.g. Williams, 1993). Is there anything beyond this view? Does God exist in any way other than as an impersonal force? Is there any reason for human beings to have faith in this God or in its goals? Does Nature have a goal toward which it is moving or does everything occur by chance? Can human beings significantly alter the course of Nature?

Perhaps in the poetry of Job we might find some inkling that the universe is proceeding towards something that is good rather than evil (Janzen, 2009). And that we can perhaps contribute in some way to this evolution. As we have already considered, at the center of his story, Job asked God to allow him time to accomplish something:

Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass;

Turn from him, that he may rest, till he shall accomplish, as an hireling, his day.

For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease.

Though the root thereof wax old in the earth, and the stock thereof die in the ground;

Yet through the scent of water it will bud, and bring forth boughs like a plant. (Job 14:5-9)

The idea of the rain bringing forth new life recurs throughout the *Book of Job*. Yahweh mentions it in his description of the thunder, and Nickles mentions the “little green leaves” in his song about the nature of God. This continual rebirth makes us wonder whether there is some mindfulness behind Nature’s apparent randomness. And makes us wonder whether we might somehow contribute to this purpose.

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Subversive Poetry



Robert Frost, 1913

Many poems of Robert Frost (1874-1963) are remembered for something completely different from what the poet actually wrote. Frost's meaning is often either opposite or orthogonal to what is initially understood.

One of Frost's early poems is *Wall Mending*, published in 1914 as the first poem in *North of Boston*. Many remember the poem as claiming that "Good fences make good neighbors." Walls serve to keep livestock away from crops. However, Frost points out to his neighbor that there is no need of the particular

wall that they are mending:

There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.

Here the wall's only purpose is to delimit what is mine and what is yours. Perhaps we might do better without such boundaries. However, the poem plays at various levels. The speaker had found breaks in the wall and arranged that he and his neighbour mend them:

I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.

There is perhaps a need for walls but this is something that cannot be expressed in the cliché that good fences make good neighbors.

Frost seduces the reader with his simplicity. Yet when he has our attention, he subverts our assumptions. Life is much more complex than what it first appears.

A later poem *Two Tramps in Mudtime*, published in 1936 in *A Further Range* can also be read at different levels. The speaker is interrupted while chopping wood by two loggers who have just been laid off from a logging camp because of the difficulties in working in the springtime. They have become unemployed and homeless: "tramps" looking for work. The loggers would clearly like to get paid for chopping the speaker's wood. However, he appears to decide that his right to enjoy the work is more important than their need.

Nothing on either side was said.
They knew they had but to stay their stay
And all their logic would fill my head:
As that I had no right to play

With what was another man's work for gain.
My right might be love but theirs was need.
And where the two exist in twain
Theirs was the better right – agreed.

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For heaven and the future's sakes.

Frost was taken to task for this conclusion by Malcom Cowley (1962). Claiming that work should be enjoyed for its own sake and not for gain is all well and good, but in the circumstances human compassion should have trumped self-interest. However, the poem is not clear what the speaker actually decided. The poem was apparently based on a real incident that had occurred a few years before its composition (Parini, 1999, pp 288-289). What happened is not known. My guess is that Frost did nothing and the loggers went on their way.

The concluding stanza of the poem is a sententious sermon. The words do not ring as clearly as in the preceding stanza nor as beautifully as some of the earlier lines describing the vagaries of the New England spring. Frost may have been criticizing himself after the fact for being a pompous fool, who could not bring himself to be compassionate and who rationalized his hardness of heart as some abstract need for avocation. Even if this is not what he meant, the poem still clearly states the two positions, and the reader can decide which one is right.

The most obvious example of Frost's multiple levels of meaning is *The Road Not Taken*. This poem was finished in 1915 just

after Frost returned to New Hampshire from England, and was published in the book *Mountain Interval* in 1916.



Edward Thomas, 1913

The idea of the poem had been triggered by his walks in rural England with Edward Thomas (1878–1917), who often had difficulty deciding which woodland path to take and who often later regretted that he had taken one and not another (Parini, 1999, p 153; Hollis, 2011, p 235). Frost himself had decided to return to North America and to write his poetry. He had urged Thomas to join him. Yet Thomas had not been sure what to do, whether to continue as a critic and essayist, to start out as a poet, or to enlist in the army.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Frost's 1951 reading of the poem:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/frost_road_not_taken.mp3

Most people remember the idea in the poem's last three lines and consider these to represent its meaning. One should decide to take untraveled paths, and thereby to achieve the otherwise impossible.

Yet this is not what the poem states. Frost is really not sure why he took one road rather than the other. Indeed, the more he thinks about it the paths were really not much different: "the passing there had worn them really about the same." He repeats this fact so that he and we are quite sure of it: "both that morning equally lay in leaves no step had trodden black."

He thinks that in the future he will remember that he took the path less traveled, but this is not what happened. Our memories are interpretations of what happened and we often distort them to make ourselves more like our ideals. What we remember becomes what we would like to have happened.

Frost leaves open why one road was taken and not the other.

Was there some reason that he now cannot remember? Was it a random choice? Was it something that was determined by everything that had preceded? Did this occur without any intervention of free will, as some recent thinkers might have us believe (Harris, 2012)? Are all our interpretations of why we choose to do something simply rationalizations of what is determined by causes that are actually beyond any conscious control?

Frost sent a copy of this poem to Edward Thomas prior to its publication. Hollis (2011) suggests that this might have contributed to Thomas' making up his mind to enlist in the British Army in July 1915, despite the fact that his age and marital status meant that he was not required to. For this he could at least not be chided for his indecisiveness.

Thomas spent over a year of his army service in England, working as a map-reading instructor. During this time he wrote most of his poems. His decision to enlist had carried with it a second decision to write poetry rather than prose.

Thomas was posted to France in early 1917 where he served as an observer for the Royal Garrison Artillery. Robert Frost informed him that he had convinced his publisher to accept a book of Thomas' poems. Thomas was killed by the blast of a shell on Easter Sunday, April 9, 1917.

Thomas' book of poems came out later that year. One of them was written in 1915 just before he decided to enlist. He had cut branches for firewood, tied them into faggots, and piled them against a hedge for use in the coming winters:

There they stand, on their ends, the fifty faggots
That once were underwood of hazel and ash
In Jenny Pinks's Copse. Now, by the hedge
Close packed, they make a thicket fancy alone
Can creep through with the mouse and wren. Next Spring
A blackbird or a robin will nest there,

Accustomed to them, thinking they will remain
Whatever is for ever to a bird:
This Spring it is too late; the swift has come.
'Twas a hot day for carrying them up:
Better they will never warm me, though they must
Light several Winters' fires. Before they are done
The war will have ended, many other things
Have ended, maybe, that I can no more
Foresee or more control than robin and wren.

Thomas had sent the poem to Robert Frost, asking him if it was "north of Boston." The phrase, deriving from the title of Frost's 1914 book that Thomas had reviewed and praised, was shorthand for the new unadorned style of poetry that they both preferred. Frost called it the "sound of sense" (Parini. 1999, p. 77).

Thomas' poem is a variation on some of the ideas in one of Frost's poems in *North of Boston: The Wood-Pile*. On a walk through the forest, the speaker comes upon a pile of wood that someone had cut several years before and not come back to claim. The poem ends on the idea that the cutter must have changed his mind about the future:

I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

Perhaps Thomas was telling his friend that he was about to make a decision that might make his wood-cutting simply an exercise, planning for a future that will not occur. Both poems show that though we do things to improve our lot, the future is not under our control. What we do now may have no meaning in a later context.

We make decisions. These are designed to improve a future that we can neither foresee nor completely control. Many preceding forces contribute to what we decide. Often our decisions are fully determined by these unconscious forces. In these cases, we can later rationalize that we acted in a particular way for reasons did not actually contribute to our decision. Yet we can make conscious choices. Sometimes we work out as best we can what we should do. Sometimes these choices render what went before irrelevant.

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