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Cosmic Auto/Biography and Homo *(In)Sapiens*: John Vernon's *A Book of Reasons*

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John Vernon's unusual fraternal memoir, *A Book of Reasons*, garnered modest acclaim in the *New York Times* in 1999, but then met with inattention, if not insouciance, on the part of teachers and scholars of auto/biography. Such a powerful and searingly intelligent memoir deserves serious attention from American readers, since Vernon, an acclaimed fiction writer and modernist critic, has engaged in an experimental exercise in radical de/formation of the autobiographical genre. Amalgamating a myriad of literary and scientific models that range from the Bible, Montaigne, and Saint Augustine to John Gardner and Stephen Hawking, Vernon has authored a text that expands the boundaries of confessional narrative in order to create an original genre that might be categorized as "onto-epistemological" or "onto-eschatological" memoir - or, perhaps, as metaphysical autobiography. He seeks to recuperate a philosophical tradition whereby ostensibly secular systems "moved within a metaphor of spiritual aspiration" and "epistemology, metaphysics, and the theory of the imagination were often 'displaced and reconstituted theology'" (Matz 35). As Jesse Matz explains in *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics*, even "psychology in its earlier moments was allegory.... One major strain of psychology depends upon spiritual quest to justify its account of the interactions of mind and matter: picking up from Leibniz, ... proceeding through Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Butler, Hartley, and Whytt, this tradition makes a theological endpoint organize the story of the way basic elements make up human reason, ethics, and belief. The story is allegorical in that it tells a more important larger story" (35-6). Vernon's unique contribution to the genre of metaphysical autobiography should provoke intense critical discussion among scholars interested in experimental forms of memoir.

"WHY?..." This is one of the first questions a developing child asks, only to discover that one ingenuous question leads to a dozen more. Why does the sun rise? Why does the moon become visible at night? Why do the stars erupt in a darkened sky and disappear at dawn? The questions are endless but, for a finite creature, the answers reach an ever-receding limit defined by the parameters of knowledge, intelligence, and creative imagination. We are not so much a "wise" species, *homo sapiens*, as a curious, questioning, and reasoning one. We ask questions and interrogate our environment, then sift through a

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middenheap of fact and fancy, history and myth, science and subterfuge, to seek a *reason* for the phenomena we investigate. If causal connection remains obscure, writers invent reasons that inhabit the space of myth. We fabricate associations where none exist, then rationalize our emotional bias, prejudice, desire, or fancy by concocting reasons to justify (ostensibly) our mature choices in a baffling universe. Ultimately, we reach an impasse – a dark tunnel or impenetrable wall where all our reasons are exhausted, and we must rely either on our instincts for survival or on a blind leap of faith to compensate for limited knowledge. Only some form of spiritual belief, be it religious or humanist, can provide a Derridean supplement for those reasons that elude the empirical scientist. In the end, we are forced to confront the hopelessness of our eternal quest for the *arcanum*, the *ratio* of reasons that might finally explain all the rest.

As rational creatures, we ponder the ineffable, explore the inexplicable, reach for the stars, then scientifically deconstruct their fiery nebulae. In the midst of this eternal inquisition of our cosmic environment, we finally confront the auto/biographical question that haunts any rational, sentient being: What is the reason for it all? Why do I exist? Does my life (or that of any other human being) have an ultimate purpose? Can I reason my way through the enigma of individual mortality? What is a wasted life, and what are the criteria for personal fulfillment? Whence came I, and where am I going? Is there a teleological reason for my existence, or does my life follow an inexorable trajectory from being to nonbeing – from the wondrous miracle of mental awareness to the absurdity of personal annihilation?

Such ponderous issues haunt the heart of every human being, and traumatic events often jumpstart our psychological gears and hurl us into a state of metaphysical yearning. Hence Vernon's remarkable project in *A Book of Reasons*. When his older brother Paul dies in his mid-sixties of an aneurysm, Vernon inaugurates a post-traumatic quest that turns bereavement into metaphysical speculation, shock into creative reconstruction.[1] The ostensible subject of this fraternal memoir is Paul (the auto/fictional version of Francis) Vernon, who was fifteen years older than John – almost like an uncle rather than an older brother. When John and his parents moved to Boston, Paul remained behind with Grandma in the village of Wire Valley, where this odd inter-generational couple kept one another company until Grandma's erratic behavior gave way to the delusional frenzy of Alzheimer's. An adolescent Paul joined his parents and younger sibling in their Boston apartment, where the bathroom was appropriated by Paul under the auspices of inventor and ham radio devotee.

Paul's weekly bathwater was left for his brother John, who seemed to absorb those fraternal molecules of soapscum and dirt with resignation and equanimity. But whereas Paul played with technical equipment and never learned to spell, a more intellectual John found refuge in a world of books that opened up educational opportunities and promised release from proletarian penury. Paul served a stint in the army, then signed on with Raytheon until mid-life retirement. He remained alone, isolated, idiosyncratic, and – most of all – inscrutable. There were annual visits to John and his family, when Paul seemed to find consolation in the company of a compassionate Hannah and John's two energetic sons. But his first visit to the couple, when John was a graduate student at the University of California at Davis, was not successful. John's sophisticated friends savagely exploited Paul's generosity, sneered and made fun of him behind his back, then guffawed at his provincial demeanor. An emotionally parsimonious clique, the group was unwilling to proffer the prize of social acceptance. Like a puppy begging for human approval, the dogged Paul fled this world of intellectual arrogance, with his lower-class tail

[1] In a 2001 conversation, John Vernon assured me that the figure of Paul was based on his older brother Francis, and that his *Book of Reasons* was 99% autobiographical and 1% autofiction. He found it necessary, for instance, in this thinly veiled memoir, to change Francis Vernon's name to Paul and, similarly, to depict his wife, Ann Frick Vernon, in the persona of Hannah. I suspect that he vaguely alludes to his home in upstate New York, without ever naming either the city or the university, to suggest an uncanny proximity between classical/contemporary Ithaca and his Odyssean journey home to Binghamton, New York.

abashedly tucked between his legs. A Volkswagen minibus and Grandma's rocker were left behind as gifts of appeasement. Later, Paul loaned John and Hannah a thousand dollars for the down payment on their first home. Later still, he forgave the debt – but not before his dog, a bitch with pups, had bitten John on the leg and tattooed a permanent mark of canine ferocity on the author's corporeal integument.

After early retirement, the idiosyncratic Paul, left alone with his dogs, cats, and radio equipment, gradually turned from queer to crazy – or so it seemed to the younger brother nominated to settle his estate. When Vernon confronts the unspeakable filth and chaos of Paul's abandoned home, he feels the double(d) shock of pain and bereavement intensified by physical horror and emotional disgust. Paul had apparently relinquished any semblance of household order, cleanliness, or social propriety. He surrendered what Julia Kristeva calls the "clean and proper body" to the "powers of horror" and the forces of abjection. All that should be cast off and separated from the civilized human being was hoarded, retained, piled up, and treasured, in patterns of anal-retentive behavior gone haywire. As Kristeva explains in *The Powers of Horror*, all corporeal waste is symptomatic of the "objective frailty of [the] symbolic order.... Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death" (71). "The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall) ... is cesspool and death.... A wound with blood and pus, ... refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.... It is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled.... The corpse, seen without God and outside science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (3-4).

Nursing his maniacal obsessions, Paul had apparently succumbed to the personal equivalent of cosmic chaos. He stopped trying to accomplish anything of importance and ceased to care about what happened to him in the context of a civilized human community. He simply let the filth wash over him like a warm bath of excremental ordure. When the plumbing in his bungalow broke down, Paul took refuge in a proliferation of Pepsi bottles and cigarettes, then used the heating shaft as an *ad hoc* toilet. Innumerable soda bottles stuffed with tobacco butts lined his lair like straw in a bird's nest. Without benefit of running water, his kitchen sink became a sordid repository for feline feces. When Paul was taken to a nearby hospital by the Volunteer Fire Brigade, after suffering an aneurysm, those unlucky pets unable to escape from his house found themselves sealed in a grotesque death-trap. One can hardly imagine the disspiriting task of extricating desiccated feline carcasses from a pile of feces and rubble. Yet that, in fact, is what Vernon had to handle when he first set foot on Paul's abandoned property.

A lesser soul would have frozen with horror, fled in fright, or considered burning the house in a ritual holocaust. The author confesses that such temptations did cross his mind. Finally, however, he recoils from his own disgust and chooses a different ritual tantamount to Hercules' cleansing of the Augean stables. With Herculean resolve, he contracts for a clean-up crew and personally removes the feline carcasses. A professor of modern literature and creative writing at Binghamton University, Vernon surely must have had in mind the indefatigable charwomen who symbolically rescued the Ramsays' Hebridean vacation home in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. In a similar ritual of cleansing, John restores his dead brother's erstwhile habitation and salvages some ham radio equipment, along with Grandma's photograph. Amidst the scattered debris, piled in a middenheap for decades, he finds a newspaper snapshot of a younger Paul. His brother is magically imaged like a Greek god bearing a flowering branch of apple blossoms and burgeoning fruit in miraculous and impossible contiguity. Here is the literature instructor's pregnant replication of Walt Whitman's lilacs or T. S. Eliot's hyacinth girl – a timeless symbol of youth and renewal, hope and resurrection, as endless promise of regeneration.

The central metaphysical question that haunts the textual unconscious of this unusual memoir concerns the ontological meaning of human existence: Was Paul's life wasted? Is the life of any human being unique, and hence of intrinsic value? Or do we, as fragile vessels of subjective consciousness, merely amass ethical nodes of affection or productivity that appear to justify – or give reason to – a lifetime of repetition and renewed biological effort? Is the value of human consciousness endemic to each experiential life-world, or must psychological fulfillment be earned through love and creativity?

Why do we exist at all, and what is the reason for our Heideggerian being-in-the-world as embodied subjects?

John Vernon is a university professor whose mind has been steeped for several decades in literature, philosophy, metaphysics, and critical theory. In searching for reasons, he rationally turns to philosophers like Kierkegaard and Heidegger, to writers as diverse as John Milton and Harold Bloom, and to contemporary French theorists as dense as Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. His restless, searching mind roams further afield – to theories of anthropology, physics, chemistry, and cosmology. This ambitious onto-epistemological project seems to imply that if there be a reason accessible to human intelligence, it lies in the Renaissance notion of *scientia* that Vernon so boldly pursues. On an heroic quest to re-educate himself in the Renaissance tradition of omnivorous scientific inquiry, the seeker summons to his aid the accumulations of past wisdom – the best that has been thought and known in western culture – for a *raison d'être* that might somehow justify his late brother's truncated life. In the process of this mid-life moral education, Vernon seeks to uncover the profound wellsprings of his own (and every) human life's psychological (self-)justification. Although the project is buttressed with a vast panoply of scientific investigation, his evocative technique pivots on a style of aesthetic impressionism, whereby "the writer's impression... makes something slight and sketchy stand for some larger experience" (Matz 45). Vernon's ontological approach is decidedly phenomenological and reminiscent of "Heidegger's effort to correlate being and existence, of Merleau-Ponty's solution to epistemological dualism, [and] of phenomenology's basic synthesis of empirical and idealistic modes" (Matz 175). As Matz reminds us, sometimes "the inspiration to that synthesis can come only insofar as one makes a collaborative object of an *abject* other" (193). The object of phenomenological impressionism is "total perceptivity" (Matz 201) and an aesthetic intervention "between romantic unities and modernist fragmentation, and (conceptually) between utopianism and social critique" (Matz 2). Aesthetic impressionism, says Matz, offers the equivalent of a "literary phenomenology," artistically "rendering life as it really seemed to individual subjective experience" (13-14). Vernon's onto-eschatological project, rendered in impressionistic prose, facilitates a "spiritual quest to justify its account of the interactions of mind and matter" through a volitional process of "moral education, which in turn leads to grace" (Matz 36).

In a brave, honest, often brilliant auto/biographical meditation in the tradition of Montaigne's *Essais*, Vernon self-consciously interrogates his newfound role as his brother's reluctant and unwitting biographer. He constructs their sibling relationship on the model of the Genesis story of Cain and Abel – cunning agricultural worker versus pastoral shepherd, urban architect versus cave-dweller, tool-maker versus (ig)noble savage. Having refused to function as his brother's keeper during Paul's lifetime, Jack self-consciously assumes the role of elegiac memoirist, committed to memorializing the effigy of his deceased sibling by imbricating this outsider's seemingly wasted life into the anthropological context of human history and the scientific enigma of cosmic chaos.

With each scientific, anthropological, or metaphysical premise Vernon interrogates in the name of ontological inquiry, he further defines not only the elusive reason that might redeem his brother's apparently wasted life, but that might distinguish the intellectual Cain figure from the semi-literate, proletarian wastrel whose pastoral innocence gave way to a desuetude indistinguishable from madness. Vernon confesses that he has pursued a career in academia with an obsessive-compulsive resolve that earned him public approval and professional acclaim. But such accolades, he realizes, cannot in themselves constitute a meaningful *raison d'être*. Academic accomplishment might, in fact, be counter-productive, as it inflates the professorial ego and shrivels pedagogical compassion. Such a sacrificial life journey runs the risk of perpetuating, in the end, the shameful mark of Cain.

In becoming the self-appointed custodian of his brother's memory, Vernon has assumed a formidable, implicitly heroic task. He refuses to shirk fraternal resemblances – even as he acknowledges, with a certain shock and horror, that the imago of Paul has hovered, like a Jungian shadow self, in the irrational recesses of his own refined and erudite consciousness. In the course of this elegiac odyssey, John is forced to admit and come to terms with the reason behind his obsessive pursuit of ambitious intellectual projects. He now understands some of the reasons why he desperately needed to separate himself from the rugged, inscrutable, swarthy, inarticulate lout that he often perceived his elder brother to be.

Alienated, in one way or another, from every member of his biological family, the gifted and talented academic felt obsessively compelled to define his own life, career, and societal persona against and in opposition to an embarrassing, maladjusted sibling. John lived, studied, married, and prospered in the shadow of a mordant ghost whose fate stood in threatening, skeletal, but genetic opposition to the author himself. He compulsively dismissed the estranged Paul as "other" and felt obliged to distance, mock, and virtually ignore the alter ego whom he had passionately and indefatigably struggled *not* to resemble. Denying any similarity to the br/other he was forced to murder in his imagination, the surviving subject is finally forced to confront the shock of his own mortality, reflected in the shocking resonance of his obsessive-compulsive scholarly drive in its Alice-in-Wonderland mirror image of a rabbit hole degraded by the filth of physiological detritus.

One thinks of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, the psychoanalytic paradigm of sibling rivalry that Vernon exploits to interpret fraternal conflict. And the prose of this highly crafted memoir summons another Freudian model, as well: that of an "uncanny" ambiance that makes the familiar strange and strikes a chord of eerie reminiscence suggestive of the infant's violent expulsion from the *Heimweh* of a maternal body uncannily shared, seriatum, by sibling rivals. As Freud explains: "This *unheimliche* place... is the entrance to the former *Heim* of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning.... [W]e may interpret the place as being [the] mother's genitals or her body" (*SE* 27:245). Having entered the world through the same birth canal, and having gestated in the same female womb, the brothers are linked inexorably by a common uterine enclosure, now symbolically defiled by the residue of a chaotic, schizoid life-style. Although these mature siblings would seem to represent, in their social personae, the Janus image of fraternal opposition, their maternal *Heimweh* of biological origin calls Vernon back to a primordial nostalgia for physiological nurturance and a presymbolic biological territory reminiscent of a maternal love free of desire or demand – an altruism without correlative obligation.

Still another literary avatar of the violent fraternal conflict imbricated in the textual unconscious of Vernon's memoir might be found in the sibling strife that drives the convoluted (non-)narrative of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. In HCE's waking dream, a compulsively prurient Shawn the Post delivers mercenary messages of civilization, propriety, greed, and decorum, while his alienated but anally liberated brother, Shem the Penman, survives in the littered lair of a Haunted Inkbattlehouse and revels in an abject environment of "pure mousefarm filth" that fertilizes the creative emissions of an authorial body producing literary texts inscribed with the fecal ink of the writer's experiential *excrementa*. Freud's analysis of infantile delight in fecal production parodically justifies, for Joyce, the irrational excesses of aleatory art.

Vernon's final gift to the memory of his deceased brother Paul strikes me as both Joycean and poetic. He correlates his brother's accidental and contingent biological development with the phylogeny of the race, on the one hand; and with a lyrical and visionary rendering of the explosion of cosmic being from originary chaos, on the other. If the writer seeks ultimate origins as the epistemological end of his intellectual quest, he must finally be satisfied with the failure of reason(s) in the context of an awesome, irrational, and inexplicable universe. Why should anything *be* rather than not? Vernon consults Heidegger's ontological inductions, as well as biblical, mythic, and aboriginal tales of human ancestry and cosmic beginnings. Such eschatological reasoning implodes in a cloud of primordial dust – the imagined chemical soup that originated from a hypothetical Big Bang. The mind reels, far beyond the elucidations accessible via Genesis, Charles Darwin, or Stephen Hawking. No ultimate reason can finally be gleaned from this line of reasoning stretching to infinity – only a MÖbius strip of involuted scientific speculation turning back upon itself. Like the Ouraburos swallowing its own tail, Vernon's biographical tale recoils upon itself to memorialize the embryonic miracle of his brother's (and, implicitly, his own) gestation and to celebrate fraternal birth in the context of an inscrutable theological mystery.

Throughout this fraught metaphysical memoir, Vernon resembles another scientifically minded Joycean character, Leopold Bloom, who is confronted in the "Ithaca" episode of *Ulysses* with a challenging cosmological meditation on the "cold of interstellar space, thousands of degrees below freezing point or the absolute zero of Fahrenheit, Centigrade or Réaumur" mitigated by "the incipient intimations of

proximate dawn" (*U* 17.1246-48). Indeed, Bloom faces the cosmic mysteries earlier elaborated by Blaise Pascal, as Joyce's contemporary hero mentally reconstructs "the parallax or parallactic drift of socalled fixed stars, ... in comparison with which the years, threescore and ten, of allotted human life formed a parenthesis of infinitesimal brevity" (*U* 17.1052-56). Like Bloom in his "increasingly vaster" nocturnal meditation, Vernon focuses his ontological inquiry on an examination of Pascal's "two infinites," from genetic molecular structure and the invisible quarks of quantum physics to an ever-expanding universe of inscrutable nebular configurations. Both 20th-century texts (Joyce's and Vernon's) might well have been inspired by Pascal's intriguing *Pensées*, a work delineating the "whole visible world" as "only an imperceptible atom in the ample bosom of nature. No idea approaches it.... It is an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere.... For in fact what is man in nature? A Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, an All in comparison with the Nothing, a mean between nothing and everything" (16-17).

Vernon's religious faith, in this document, proves as nebulous as the fiery stars which he ostensibly scrutinizes. Though educated as a Roman Catholic in Boston, he reveals the agnosticism of a skeptical St. Augustine or a cogitating Montaigne, silently invoking a deity who may or may not exist. Echoing the uncertainty of Pascal's *Pensées*, Vernon makes a wager based on love rather than on reason. What saves him from succumbing to the ghosts of intergenerational trauma and haunting flashbacks is his ability to reformulate bereavement in pensive, lyrical, autobiographical prose. Through the folds of this qualified tribute seeps a fraternal love as unquenchable as the stars – as vivid as the love he feels for his wife Hannah and for the two sons they so passionately cherish. Surviving in order *not* to be Paul, Vernon clings to a hopeful, daring, and regenerative subject position as faithful husband and committed *paterfamilias*.

The pores of his text exude paternal care and an amorous devotion to his wife of twenty years, the inimitable Hannah, who serves as the Beatrice of his Dantesque journey and the Penelope of his Homeric divagations. No Hercules he, Vernon returns, like a wandering Odysseus, to the warmth and shelter of his home in upstate New York (a location geographically proximate to another Ithaca). There, in the comforting presence of a drowsy wife and sleeping sons, he finds the reason to justify his existence in a mysterious and unknowable cosmic habitation: Like the Nostos section of Joyce's *Ulysses*, the end of Vernon's memoir restores the wandering hero to the bed of his contemporary Penelope in the lyrical mode of a midlife Epithalamion. And like the "Penelope" episode of *Ulysses*, Vernon's text ends on a note of epiphany and grace. As Richard Ellmann observes about the conclusion of Joyce's epic, the final words of Molly Bloom's monologue evince an "epithalamium; love is its cause of motion. The spirit is liberated from its bonds through a Eucharistic occasion.... Though such occasions are as rare as miracles, they require no divine intercession. They arise in quintessential purity from the mottled life of everyday" (379).

The joy of domestic sanctuary and familial devotion is too simple to articulate, too pervasive to define. Amidst the chaos and bereavement that engulf his spirit and dominate his life-world after Paul's death, the one thing that remains to rescue Vernon from the kind of perdition that plagued his prodigal brother is spousal and filial affection. Such love was, and remains, the *reason* for it all – the struggle to deny fraternity, the compensatory memoir, Jack's Herculean efforts to restore his brother's house, and the preposterous project of shoring up the Eliotic fragments of Paul's ruined life by making his abject environment habitable once again – and celebrating this symbolic triumph in elegant, enduring prose. One hopes that, by the end of this unique memoir, Paul Vernon's wayward spirit will have found shelter in the literary temple erected in his honor by an author who has, indeed, become his brother's keeper, keeping safe his memory through autobiographical elegy. As John returns home to Binghamton, New York, his fraternal burdens of intergenerational trauma and emotional alienation have finally been exorcised and released with the corpse of his dead – and recently buried – fraternal alter ego.

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