

## The Itch

Itch.

My father had a favourite proverb—well, actually it was a dictum disguised as an aphorism: “Anything for a quiet life.” A pithy saying by any other name—and it was usually called George. So it ran—well actually it walked, staggered, lurched, it carried a cane. How strange then that I had never experienced even a fleeting quiet moment of quiet.

I was trying for one now: I was sitting in the university library, feet up, surrounded by a book that ostensibly examined the congruity between homosexuality and cannibalism in the works of Melville—aka Moby the Dick. The congruity—connection by any other name—was tenuous to say the least. To say the most, it was positively hanging by the proverbial thread, clinging on by its tenter hooks, dangling by its dingle. Thankfully, the book’s relevance, here as elsewhere, is as passing as its thesis—though thankfully much shorter. Skip back. Reread. Find it? It is the “feet up” bit, disguised as a passing detail, which is the real crux of the matter, the subject proper of our meandering. Long though it was, with that Melville stuff at the end to throw you off the trail, yet there it was. There it was, in black and white—and we all know that in black and white means *real*.

Considerate me, anything for a quiet life me, who, to avoid the serious sully of chair and table—the common footrest of the common student—had brought over a small mobile footstool, designed—and patented in nine countries—for the purpose of feet, there upon to stand, allowing outstretched hands to grasp low books upon high shelves. It is a Kik Stool™ by any other name. So, with my feet rested upon said foot thing, I had assumed a position that can only be described as comfortable. It was a bad assumption.

From around some cunning corner comes a guard of immense stature, his blue uniform as impressive as a green uniform dyed red. Around that crooked corner, that circuitous by-way, that roundabout winding, that lippy bending bend, around he comes like an epic hero wrongfully cast in a farce. Actually, it was theatre of the absurd, and the curtain was going up.

“Get your feet off there!” he chelped, snatching the Kik Stool™ away—plop went my feet—and dashing off down the shadowy stacks where the footy thing was redeposited in a dusty corner below a top shelved book entitled: *Abstracts of feet of fines relating to Wiltshire, 1377-1509*, edited by J.L. Kirby; a fine genealogical study of fines and recoveries in Wiltshire.

I was hopping mad—so to speak. I felt wrangle. And wrangle felt good. And we had sex.

Breaking at least one principle of *Poetics*—and shattering a number of others—the next day came about. About the next day. About the next day. I was back in my usual place, again going for that quiet life, feet up, reading a book whose subject was the socio-historical significance of footnotes<sup>1</sup> in Pope’s *Dunciad*. Never mind Pope, what about God? that’s what I wanted to know. This time you realised it was the foot thing to watch, and that Pope stuff was just a read herring. That’s good. That’s very good—though unfortunately, once again, thou art following the wrong line—at the end of which is, yes, another read herring. Glance back: this time it is the “quite life” bit providing the subject, for you see, at that very moment, I fell asleep and pulled silence about me like a comfy blanket.

Itch.

It must have been the next day. There I was, back in the library, assuming the usual uncompromising position and this time reading a comparison study of the

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<sup>1</sup>It all seemed like a load of rubbish to me.

1608 Quarto 1 and 1623 Folio versions of *King Lear*, which suggested the first had been penned by Marlowe and the second by his dog. The authentic Shakespearean meta-text of *King Lear* was lost somewhere in the back wardrobe of Mrs. Agness Eccles of 16 Highbrow Row, Kippax—probably amongst her old shoes.

And then again, around that devilish corner, comes that dunciad<sup>2</sup> of a guard. This time I was ready for him.

“Get your feet off there!” he growled, swooping down vulture-like to grab the Kik Stool™.<sup>3</sup>

“Pardon?”

Stopping the swoop in mid swoop, surprised, he answered: “Get your feet off there!”

“I’m sorry, are you talking to me or a dog? I did see a dog. Earlier.”

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<sup>2</sup>The author’s repeated allusion to Pope’s superlative text is indicative of a similar treatment, here, of a dissimilar subject. THEOBALD

The learned Theobald surely surprises us with such an inferior suggestion. The actual inference is of a dissimilar treatment of a similar subject. CIBBER.

The author is clearly cognisant of innate problems of subject contemporaneity in Pope’s otherwise most excellent ditty; and it is to this that our attention is directed. Accordingly, *The Itch*, as careful readers will surely note, avoids the use of individualisms, preferring a system of nomenclature which emphasises the archetypal nature of its *Dramatis Personae*. SCRIBLERUS

<sup>3</sup>Previous critiques have most erroneously made dastardly use of this line as evidence that our learned author is a generous nincompoop. “Who ever heard of a growling vulture?” they demand. Less perverse readers must surely allow this a playful satire done deliberate and done delicate. SCRIBLERUS

In actual fact, the *Great Crested Vulture* of the *Americas* is celebrated—according to the honourable T. Chester’s *Natural History of the New World*—for its growl like squawk oft emitted as it swoops towards its helpless pray.

“What? A dog? Ain’t no dogs ’lowed in ’ere.” And then the fellow saw my feet again, remembered my feet and forgot about the dog.

“I said, get your feet down. You ain’t allowed puttin’ ’em on that.”

“What, on that foot thing? I can’t put my feet on that foot thing?”

The fellow wouldn’t recognise irony if it slapped him in the face and called him Susan. He wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer, but his mother always used him as a spoon, so it never became a problem. Dull? The fellow couldn’t be made bright if you buffed him up to the hilt—or wherever you preferred to stop. For myself, the hilt is going a bit too far.

“No.”

“Why’s that?”

“You ain’t allowed.”

“Show me the rule,” I began, speaking slowly so he could follow, “written down, in black and white, where it says I can’t put my feet on a foot thing, and I’ll be happy to take them down.”

“There’s lots of things ain’t writ down that you’ve not got to do,” he dribbled.

“Like what?”

“Like, er, er,” I could hear the rusty cogs turning, “like killing someone.”

“That’s right, there’s no written law about killing.” I nodded and smiled a sympathetic smile. “Now look, read my lips.” And then, with lavish mouth movements that smacked of oral ballet, I said, “Scuttle along.”

The poor fellow had no idea what scuttle meant. I gave a couple of delicate flicks of my limp wrist in the direction of the crafty corner, as a visual aid.

Quandary time. He looked down at the Kik Stool™ and then up at me, and then at the insane turning, his hand twitching ready to quick draw his imaginary six shooter. He was natural born cop, but had failed the demanding IQ test. They gave him a driver’s licence as a consolation prize. He crashed on his first day out.

He felt impotent. Woe was him: nothing more than a poxy library guard with a hole in his jockey shorts. But now, all of a sudden, he could feel potency shifting and shafting. It was his big chance to be a man again. He reached down to grab the Kik Stool™.

“I don’t think you should do that,” I said, as calm as a black pudding in a vegetarian’s kitchen cupboard. The poor fellow seemed confused by what seemed to be a seeming reversal of the natural order of things. He wobbled as if upon an existential precipice. Normally he would piss off the edge, but pissing, apparently, was against the unwritten rules of the library.

“Scuttle along now,” I repeated with the same gesticulation. It was at this point that the fellow, dizzy with it all, actually scuttled along.

Itch.

So there I was, with the feet still up on the Kik Stool™, basking in the victory of sense over stupidity like a flopping sea lion in a small zoo owned by a butcher’s son. It was seven minutes later when I realised that though the battle had been won, the war was far from settled. Yes—and no—the gormless guard reappeared around that twisty section, now preceded by an identical, though slightly taller, cohort. In single file they marched the goose step, attempting synchronicity though achieving only flailing syncopation. It was a spectacular sight. Students around and about lowered their books, raised their eyes and removed their underwear. Breath was bated and the fish were biting. The atmosphere was electric—though at least two fuses seemed to have blown. There was an increasing sense of “event.” At any moment we expected rain. And where was the fellow selling tie-dyed T-shirts?

“Now den,” began the taller fellow, “yous better get yer feet down.”

“Who the hell are you?” I asked politely.

“Ach, tis myself. I is de security supervisingator.”

“Well why don’t you scuttle along and supervise some security.”

“Yous not allowed putting de feet on dat.”

“On that?” I pointed. “On that foot thing? No feet on that foot things?” It was at that point that I realised both guards wore gloves—on their heads.

“Dat’s right.”

“You might think it’s right. I think it’s a figment of your imagination.”

“I ain’t got no magination—”

“I’m sorry about that; but in any case, where I come from foot things are used for feet.”

“Can I be seeing your student card?”

“I don’t know, can you?” Silent pause, blank stare. “Oh, you mean *may* you.” Silent pause, blank stare. In terms of evolution the taller one was on a bigger branch than the shorter one, but it would still be zillions of years before they moved out of the trees. “Yes, you may.”

“Tanks.” He seemed to examine the thing forever. The shorter one stood on his tippy-toes and peeped over his shoulder.

“Nice picture, eh?”

The taller one was now busy writing down my student number, his lips moving silently as he engraved each digit into his well fingered black book.

“Need some help?” I asked. Drat: he lost concentration and wrote a seven instead of a three. Now he would have to start all over again. Finally, he handed back the card. I was reading a book entitled: *Chairs : a serious, comic, metaphysical, insane, feet-on-the-ground examination of the burning issue of chairness* —an art catalogue of an exhibition held at the Art Gallery of Ontario, and took no notice of him. He placed the card on the table beside me.

“Are yer gonna take yer feet down?”

“I’m sorry, are you talking to me? There was a dog, went down that way.” The smaller guard scanned the distance, eager to catch that pesky law breaking pooch that was always giving him the slip. The taller one, the supervisor one, well he was too smart to fall for a trick like that. Instead, I pulled a rabbit out of a hat—now *that* amazed him. Actually, it amazed me too—I had no hat.

“I’ll be giving you one last chance,” he said.

“That’s very generous of you. One last chance. Any higher bids?” I glanced about the room. “Any higher bids now?” All the students quickly hid behind their books. “You sir,” I turned my attention to the smaller guard, “do I hear two last chances? Yes? Two last chances.” The poor fellow actually nodded. I think he thought he was getting a deal. “Sold to the small person in the blue uniform with the gloves on his head.” The taller one turned around and gave a reprimanding glare.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said in my best reasonable voice, “you show me the rule, written down in black and white, that says foot things are not to be used for feet, and I’ll happily take them down.”

“Dere’s lots of tings dat you can’t do dat’s not wrote down.”

“Like what?” I seemed to be detecting a pattern.

“Eeerr, er,” the taller one was much quicker, “like setting fire to stuff.”

“That’s right, etc. and so on. Listen now, I’ve got a lot of work to do, so why don’t you both scuttle along.”

Itch.

It was twenty-four minutes later. Around that thing we now understand to be a perfectly ordinary corner came the shorter and the taller guard, now preceded by an *even taller* guard. He was a sturdy fellow, as lanky as a Corinthian column, though only half as ornate. Again they marched in chaotic syncopation, yet now numbered three, the irregularity of their step seemed strangely regular, like a finely

choreographed slapstick routine. They arrived—without the use of a safety net. Too bad: the *even taller* guard came to a sudden halt not anticipated by the two behind. They tumbled forwards. They tumbled downwards. They tumbled inward. They tumbled outward. The taller one and the shorter one—wearing expressions of stupefaction—assumed a trajectory suggestive of an imminent collision with my feet—still supported, of course, by the Kik Stool™. I was wearing my propitiously dainty shoes that day—and not my size eleven clodhoppers: the toe of each dainty shoe found itself suddenly lodged in the respective left and right nostrils of the two subordinate guards. Their swooping fall had literally become a nose dive. Meanwhile, the *even taller* guard, positioned centrally between his flailing friends, had assumed an entirely different itinerary. With his quick wits he knew, almost at once, that he was falling; and he opened his mouth in the shape of an “O”—as in Oooops. He was a good deal taller. By warrant of his superior stature, he yet lingered in the air, as if suspended by a fickle fate with tons of time to kill. Mouth still open—as in “Oh my God”—the *even taller* guard—he was a good deal taller—continued on his medianic course. He was a good deal taller—not to mention much more handsome. Down he fell. A certain sense of propriety—and a well founded fear of my mother—precludes an explicit account of where, precisely, he fell, and what part of me, precisely, filled his woefully opened mouth. He was smiling and licking his lips when he came up. I was smoking a cigarette.

“No smoking in the library,” he said. They’d got me on that one. I offered no resistance.

After the lengthy extraction that required the use of a pocket knife, a lollipop stick and a piece of knotted string, all three guards finally struck a dignified pose. The *even taller* guard in particular, straightening his tie, was trying to achieve a



modicum of dignity indicative of his status; and he was doing a fine job—if only he would take it up full-time and quit the security stuff.

“Och now,” he continued, glancing down at my feet still resting upon the Kik Stool™, “ye seem to have a problem?” His voice had turned tender, most tender, like a leg of virgin spring lamb. It would be very nice with a spot of Yorkshire pudding and some gravy—but then, there was no eating allowed in the library. He sat down beside me. He was trying the softly-softly approach. I expected him, at any moment, to put up his feet as well.

“Er, I don’t actually have a problem. I think *you’re* the one with the problem.”

“Och now Jimmy, there’s no reason for ye being uncivil,” he said. “Ye just can’t be putting feet on that.”

“What? Not put my feet on that foot thing?”

“Nay.”

“Well, you see, I’ve been putting my feet on these foot things for years now, and no one ever said a word—”

“Ye’s not alloowed.”

“—and now you jokers come stomping around, inventing all kinds of rules and annoying people.”

“Just promise me Jimmy, promise ye won’t do it again, and that’ll be the end of it.”

“What do you mean, ‘*again?*’—I’m *still* bloody doing it.”

“Just promise.”

“Just promise? Who the hell are you? I don’t need to promise you anything.”

“*I’m the head of security.*” His self importance was palpable. It palped. “*I’m the one who keeps this place going. I’m the one that runs this place—*”

“It must all be in the shoes,” I quipped, glancing at his Adidas cross-trainers.

“—Och, *I’m* the one in charge of everything around here.” Delusions of grandeur were only part of it: he also had imaginary medals for bravery, standing to attention, frisky frisking and wound infliction—not to mention a certificate for swimming three lengths in good style.

“Well, I’d like to see the written rule, written in black and white—and so on.”

“Och, Jimmy, there’s lots of things ye can’t be doing that isne written doon.”

“Like what etc.?”

“Like treason. Ye canne be doing treason in the library.”

“That’s good: no law against treason. Now why don’t you and your merry men scuttle along.”

They scuttled. The war was over. I sat with feet on the Kik Stool™ like a victorious emperor standing on his rostrum—the only difference being, I was horizontal and had not, as yet, married my sister.

Itch.

It was a dark and stormy night. I was helping Ivan Yslimygit, my Cossack friend from Bradford, move apartments. I was his first choice as moving buddy because my company was like a cat to his meow. Also, I was his only friend. Also, I had a car. Well, it was a red mini, but it was still a car. Anyway, we managed the moving with remarkable ease—though the grand piano was a tight squeeze, and we had to fold down the back seat for the four-poster bed, and the less said about the ping-pong table the better.

Itch.

Ivan’s new apartment was an up-market condemned building in a clogged artery of downtown. It would suit him fine and dandy. It was spacious enough to swing a cat, so long as all four limbs were tied to its head. It was the kind of roomy place that made you wish you had a room. It was like a closet, without the space for hanging up clothes. It was one of those modern “studio” places, the

kind where midgets who suffer from agoraphobia paint pictures of naked dwarfs. There was a space set aside for the kitchen, which also served as a shower and fire escape. It was a lovely place, though it did need a bit of a tidy up. Actually, it was the dirt that kept the walls from falling in. There was only one drawback to the whole place—he had to live there.

Itch.

When the move was all over we decided to eat out—just as a precaution. We reached the car on the street only to find a parking ticket under the wiper.

“Jesus, what’s that in aid of? I thought I could park here.”

“I think you can,” Ivan said. “Look at all the others.” There were dozens of cars parked around and about.

“Damn. Fucking damn. Jesus, son of a bitch kiss my arse. Bastard bastard bastard.” I was a tad perturbed.

“Look!” Ivan pointed, “there’s the Traffic Warden.” Sure enough, there he was, marching down the street with his little black book tucked under his arm. “Quick.”

“Yeah, quick,” I agreed, “let’s beat him up.”

“No, no.”

“No, let’s kill him.”

“No, let’s ask him why he gave you a ticket.” Like all Cossacks, he was a peace-loving fellow.

“We could do that as well,” I agreed.

Now Ivan is the kind of person who always says the right thing at the right time to the right people. “Let me do the talking,” I told him.

“Excuse me,” I called after the uniformed fellow. He looked around as we crossed the road. “You seem to have made a mistake.”

“What’s that?” he smiled supercilious. Clearly he was not the kind that ever made mistakes.

“Well, you’ve given me a ticket for parking where I’m allowed to park.”

“Where?”

“Over there.” I pointed at my redder than red red mini.

“No,” he shook his head, “there’s no mistake. You committed a parking infraction and so I gave you a ticket.” This was, clearly, a multi-syllabic Traffic Warden. He knew it and I knew it.

“Look, show me where it says—in black and white—that I can’t park there and I’ll happily accept the ticket.”

“Follow me sir,” he said. Multi-syllabic *and* polite: a sense of defeat gripped me like a gripping thing. Well, we followed. Just beside the car, covered in rust and hidden behind a bush was a sign: “No parking between 19:14—19:19, Monday to Wednesday during quarter moons at high tide.”

“Ha!” I laughed, knowing I had wrestled victory out of the wrestling-ring of defeat: “It’s *Thursday!*” Oh the joy. The bliss. The rapture. It was just then the horribly competent Traffic Warden took out a long stick from beneath his jacket, and using it in the manner for which it was designed, pushed a branchy branch aside, revealing a previously hidden line upon the sign. “Thursdays inclusive.” Drat drat and drat again.

“There it is, sir, in black and white.”

“To hell with the black and white: it’s absolute crap. What kind of madness is that? ‘Between 1914 and 1919.’ We thought it was some First World War thing.”

“The law’s the law.”

“The law’s an ape,” I pointed out.

“That seems to make you a monkey’s uncle,” he pointed out—what ever *that* meant. This chap was just too smart for me. Actually he was the worst sort of dunciad<sup>4</sup>—the kind that thought they made sense.

Ivan and I made off to Chinatown, entered a restaurant and ordered sausage foo yung, Cantonese beans on toast, sweet and sour fish and chips and a delicious mono-sodium glutamate bubble and squeak. It was all prepared according to traditional Chinese methods—and the scarcity of dogs in the neighbourhood was proof enough for me. It was certainly a classy joint.

“Thanks for helping me move,” Ivan said, giving a brief scratch to his bum.

“No problem,” I said, tucking into my egg foo spotted-dick.

“Did I ever tell you the joke about the Englishman, the Irishman, and the . . . er—”

“Scotsman?” I offered.

“Oh, you’ve heard it?”

“No, it was just a lucky guess.” Like all Cossacks, he was a born wag.

“Okay, there was an Englishman, an Irishman, and a Scotsman—and a dog—on a train. They were all sitting there in this compartment thing. So, the Englishman looks at the Irishman and says, ‘Is that your dog?’ The Irishman man shakes his head and answers, ‘Nuffink to do with meself—nope, not my dog.’ He looks at the Scotsman and says, ‘Is that *your* dog?’ The Scotsman shakes his head and answers, ‘Och nope, not my dog.’ So they’re all quiet again when all of a sudden the Irishman looks at the Englishman and says, ‘Is that your dog?’ The English man shakes his head and answers, ‘Nope, not my dog.’ He looks at the

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<sup>4</sup>I reiterate my point concerning the meaning of allusions to Pope’s satire of like appellation. THEOBALD

Ibid. SCRIBLERUS

Ibid. CIBBER

Scotsman and says, ‘Is that *your* dog?’ The Scotsman shakes his head and answers, “Och nope, not my dog.” So they’re all quiet again when all of a sudden the Scotsman looks at the Englishman and says, ‘Is that your dog?’ The Englishman shakes his head and answers, ‘Nope, not my dog.’ He looks at the Irishman and says, ‘Is that *your* dog?’ The Irishman man shakes his head and answers, ‘Nuffink to do with meself—nope, not my dog.’ So they’re all quiet again when all of a sudden the carriage door opens and in walks the train inspector. He looks at the Englishman. So, guess what he says?”

“Is that your dog?” I ventured.

“No. ‘Tickets please.’” My Cossack friend laughed his head off.

We finished our extraordinary meal in fine oriental style: a cup each of specially blended Russian Tea. It was my Cossack chum’s favourite.

“It tastes pretty normal, to me,” I told him. “What’s Russian about it?”

“You’ve got to drink it quick,” he pointed out.

Itch.

Well hi-ho-tiddle-i-fay, was it already the next day? Was I back in my usual library spot with my feet well rested on that now famous Kik Stool™? I suppose yes and yes, and, for all I know, maybe even yes again. I was reading a book entitled: *Be jubilant my feet : African American abolitionists in the American Missionary Association, 1839-1861*, by Clara Merritt DeBoer. A serious study—if ever there was one—of African American history and culture, paying particular attention to “slavery: its pros and cons.” But what’s this? What’s this suit and tie coming around the corner? Goodness gracious, it’s a suit and tie with all the necessary appendages.

“Thomas Cartwright?”

“That’s me,” I answered.

“Before I revoke all your library privileges, would you like to talk to me in my office?” Questions: who was this appendaged fellow? What was he? What Library *privileges*? And did he really have an office? Well, we had met the Englishman, the Irishman, and even the Scotsman—and I supposed this must be the dog. I followed him to his spacious office; a plaque on the door told me he was the fellow in charge of the whole library. Once in the office he changed tactics, introducing himself, shaking my hand, offering me a seat. Hello, shake, down I sat.

“What, you don’t have a footrest?” I asked, glancing about with exaggerated head turnings. “You should bring in one of those Kik Stool™.”

“So, what seems to be the problem?” he asked

“It’s a tricky one, but maybe you can help: when St. Thomas Aquinas suggests, in his first cosmological argument for the existence of God, that whatever is moved must be moved by another, and that it’s necessary to arrive at a first mover: that being God: well, was he going at it ass-backwards? That’s the problem. I mean, surely it’s the *last* mover that counts.”

“I was thinking of another problem.”

“Oh, the feet problem?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you see, I’ve been putting on this special powder and I’ve got these charcoal things in the bottom of my shoes, so everything should be all right.”

“I mean your problem with the guards. It seems you’ve been causing some trouble.”

“Actually, it’s the guards who’ve been causing the trouble. I think you should fire the lot.”

“They’re just doing their jobs,” he said.

“Mmm, I think that’s what they said at Nuremberg.”

“You see—”

“Look, just show me where it says—in black and white—that feet aren’t allowed on foot things.”

“There are lots of things you can’t do that aren’t written down.”

“Like what?”

He was fast. He was furious. He was dumber than a blank page in an empty book with the cover torn off. “Like spitting on the floor.” It was a good attempt—better at least than the boys in blue.

“Well, you see, there are certain social conventions that interplay with questions of legality.”

“Pardon?”

“What I mean is, we seem to be arguing semantics.”

“I never mentioned Jews,” he said.

“You seem to be missing the point. The point is, these storm troopers are marching around causing more trouble than an atheistic paedophile in a private school run by nuns. The problem is, whoever hired them is an ass and should be fired for incompetence.” —Well how was I to know *he* was the ass who had hired the whole bloody lot of them?

“Listen to me, Mr. Cartwright: if I have one more complaint about you, you’ll have your library privileges permanently revoked.” There he was, talking about privileges again—and I thought I was *paying* to go to school. To hell with that. One more complaint meant I had one more chance meant that it was time for some empty bravado.

“You really think,” I began, standing up, “that you could have me permanently expelled from the library for breaking an imaginary unwritten rule that doesn’t actually exist? Ha!” I laughed. I marched out with a creepy sense of no longer



being myself, as if I was rather carnivalization personified—when really all I ever wanted was a quiet life.

Itch.

Well, I suppose, in a sense, I had won the war—but it was a funny kind of victory that left me shackled to good behaviour. I mean, I had no problem being shackled, but where was the wench with the whip? That “one last chance” was both absolution and a conviction; a tease without the possibility of orgasm. Ever.

Later that afternoon I was at home, with my feet comfortably up on a chair. I was reading Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*. His initial claim that the continuous evolution of Art is dependent upon the duality of its character—the plastic and the non-visual—seemed, at least to me, to be neither one thing nor the other. Certainly, suggesting the relationship of the two is akin to that of the sexes—with changing periods of conflict, reconciliation and competition becoming the driving forces for art’s progression—pays scant attention to the empowerment of modern women and the now common practice of affirmative hiring. And as for all that Dionysian stuff—well I think he must have been drunk when he wrote that.

All of a sudden I scratched my arm. It was, I should add, in response to an itch emanating from that same region. A bit later, another itch, this time just below my right knee, forced a similar response. A bit later, under my chin: itch: scratch. It all seemed perfectly innocuous, but then, all of a sudden, I felt a flash back attack coming on: sitting in Chinatown with Ivan after a hard *demenagement*, when there you have it: he scratched his bum. Was Ivan’s bum scratching and my arm, leg and chin scratching nothing more sinister than pure coincidence, or was there some concatenatious factor involved? Was there some common element? Was the dirt and filth and probable infestation of his new abode in some way relevant? Or were we experiencing some kind of sympathetic psycho-kinetic communication? Or perhaps aliens were involved? Then again, similar itchings had

been experienced in recent times by Tibetan monks contemplating the *origins* of reincarnation. A dozen more likely explanations advanced through my mind, like a parade of boy scouts caught with their trousers down. Working upon the principle that the least likely explanation is the most likely explanation, I decided that Ivan's pestilential apartment was the culprit, and that tiny creepy-crawly things were *ham-skanking* all over my body. It was hardly a pleasant thought. I rushed out to the chemist and got a single bottle of Lice Lotion by the legal exchange of moneys for goods, and another fifty by clandestine subterfuge. The instruction outlined the method of application: a thin layer (approx. 10cl.) was to be spread over the contaminated area and washed off after no longer than five minutes. Emptying bottle upon bottle, I filled up the bath tub, stripped off and dove in head first. Two hours later I climbed out, confident that nothing, neither a creepy nor a crawly, now hoofed about on any part of me—confident because the Lice Lotion left my entire epidermis hanging from my bones like rags on a weathered scarecrow. Strange then that later that night, laying in bed, awkward itches appeared from this section then that.

For the rest of the week this strangest of scratchings occupied me. Something, I finally realised, lurked *beneath* my skin, safe and protected and intent upon devouring me from within. During the weekend came a slight reprieve, but by Monday morning the whole song and dance started up again, and keener than before.

On Tuesday the phone rang. Sounding strangely like a ticket inspector, the Dean of Students—otherwise known as “Sir,” politely ordered me to his office at my earliest “convenience—right now.” Always one to accommodate—my mother ran a bed and breakfast—I footed my way to his cavernous cubicle.

“Thomas Cartwright?” he stood up and reached over his desk. I thought he was about to throttle me. We shook hands instead. “Sit down. Now, there's been

a good deal of activity over the past week,” he began. “There’s been a good deal of agitation all round.”

“I’m sure—I have the itching to prove it,” I offered, giving myself a good scratch at the same time.

“It seems,” he continued, “that you’ve been behaving in a manner not consistent with your position here.”

“What position is that?”

“Sat down with your feet on a foot thing.”

“It’s a fine position.”

“That’s beside the point. The point is, steps have been taken to see your permanent removal from the library.”

“I thought that thing was all settled. I was given ‘one last chance.’”

He took no notice: “As a result, your library privileges are entirely revoked.”—There was that “privileges” stuff again. Who were they kidding? “I have to ask you to hand over your library card.”

“And my silver sheriff’s badge?”

“No, you can keep that.” I handed over my library card. “And I also have to ask you to immediately return any and all books you might presently have out.”

“Even the ones I’ve stolen?”

“I’m afraid so. Now, I am aware that you are presently doing graduate studies.”—Yes, but was the damn fellow aware that I was also employed by the university as a research assistant?—“Similarly I am aware that you are also employed by the university as a research assistant. As I’m sure you appreciate, both these positions are problematic.”

“Now, correct me if I’m wrong,” I began with certain sarcastic gusto, “but all this stems from me breaking a rule that actually has no empirical existence; no corporeal being; a rule that is written nowhere and has been seen by no-one; a

phantom of a rule.” I scratched my bum in an effort to underline everything I had said. “Well listen to me, some day, some how, this phantom of a rule will come back and haunt you. Say hello to sleepless nights.”

“In the mean time *Mr Cartwright*, I have more bad news.”—If it was such bad news, how come he was smiling? And did I actually shrug at the very place of his misplaced caesura? I certainly did—and without the use of a safety net. “Although we’ve decided to allow you to continue your studies here—despite strong protestations from some quarters—”

“They do nothing by halves?”

“—nevertheless, I’m afraid you’ve been fired from your research job.” Theatre of the absurd had turned domestic tragedy.

“Er, just a sec. Pause. Rewind. Slow motion. Freeze frame. Let’s get the head-cleaner out, shall we?” To say I was stupefied would be to say that this fellow was stupid.

“You didn’t receive form 482/3? It explains the whole process.”

“No, but I got 945/4.”

“Which is that?”

“It’s the one they always send with form 288-7.”

“Is that the one printed on blue paper?”

“No, pink. The blue one is the one they send with the purple one.”

“Which is that?”

“The one that comes just before the orange one.”

“Is that the—?” he spluttered in sad splutters.

“Yes, the red one.”

“Red?” He seemed ready to cry.

“449/3.”

“Oh.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“So why was I fired?” The poor fellow. He was only the Dean of Students. I could hardly expect him to follow the subject of a conversation through three levels of meanderings. Nevertheless, he was in all other respects eminently qualified for his position: his posterior fit snugly into the indentation of his leather chair. Not everyone can claim such a befitting position.

“You see, action has been taken, not only in the Library, but in the English Department also.”

“Yes, yes, I believe it: I have the itching to prove it.” I repeated. I thought for a moment curiosity might make him ask for an explanation—and I was keen on finding one myself.

“You don’t seem to have many friends in the department. They see you as being belligerent. They see you as an irritation—an irritation that they can’t quite scratch.”—Hey, flip my flop, what the hell was going on here? I was the one itching all week.

“You see, now they’ve found a way. You’ve seen backed.” What should rightly have been an elegy fell from his mouth instead as a spoonerism.

“I’ve been sacked,” I said with hagiographic gloom.

“It seems you just didn’t suit.” He straightened his tie and brushed a speck from his jacket.

“What the hell do you mean?”

“There’s nothing I can do, it’s out of my hands.” He actually waved those pandies about—wobbling his fingers in an excited sort of way, almost as if he thought they were ten dancing exclamation marks—to display apparently their evident emptiness, thinking that the physical proof would knock the wind out of any arguments I might have. Of course, I knew two things that he did not:

emptiness seldom knocks the wind out of anything; run on sentences make me immune to any number of exclamation marks.

“What the hell do you mean?” There really was no point arguing: it was all a *fait accompli*, a lost cause by any other name.

“It’s out of my hands,” he wiggled those digits with increased vivacity. I was beginning to wonder if he was the Dean of Students or a schizophrenic hand puppet. At the very least, the left hand had no idea of the doings of the right, and if it did, it cared not; and if it cared, it considered not; and if it considered, it believed overt displays of affection unmanly.

“What the hell do you mean?” To be honest, I have no idea who offered this final interrogation. It was either me, the Dean of Students, or the schizophrenic hand puppet. There ensued a pause so prolonged it almost qualified as a period: an epoch by no means, nor an age, but very nearly a fortnight.

“A research assistant with no library access is of limited value. In any case, they tried you, and it didn’t work out.” I knew that would be the party line.

“What the hell do you mean?”

“They tried you and—”

“They didn’t try me, they *tried* me; and who the hell spoke in my defence? And with no respect of the Geneva convention. Where the hell’s the Geneva convention when you need it.”

“Geneva,” he said.

I stomped out. Well, actually, I was wearing my dainty shoes, so there was not a good deal of actual stomping going on—more a gentle scuttle.

I took all my books—even the ones I had stolen—back to the library. As I walked through the doorway a large notice, affixed to the wall in a prominent position, wrenched my attention from its sockets.

### **Library Rules<sup>5</sup>**

The following are not allowed:

Talking

Listening

Smoking

Eating

Drinking.

Dogs

Pissing

Murder

Arson

Treason

Spitting

No resting of feet on Kick Stools™

Identical notices were mounted upon pedestals on the staircase at each floor. A smaller version pasted onto wooden triangular boxes—and looking like ideal footrests—sat on all the tables. Well, yes, now the rules were written down in black and white—but what the hell *is* a rule? From whence does it come? From what source its authority, its integrity, its legitimacy, its viscosity?

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<sup>5</sup>This listing of lists brings to mind Mr. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and is a subtle reminder that no man is an Island.

SCRIBLERUS

It is rather an allusion to the shopping list of *Mrs* Defoe, which included everything except what Mr. Defoe had specifically requested. Thus, with nothing to eat in the house that matched his fancy, he instead consumed endless hours in penmanship, composing his *Crusoe* yarns, a fellow who most notably secured his own victuals. CIBBER

Several weeks passed. I appealed the case to the Ombudsman. Erstwhile a solid heterosexual with sound footing, his position had been redesignated Ombudsperson. He now wore a slinky dress and sheer stockings to the office, and spoke with a lilt. Consequently, he had become the pleonastic golfing partner of the Dean of Students. With time to reflect, I began to realise that indeed, rules are rules, and we must live according to the rules. My appeal was therefore based upon two important arguments: 1) the signs in the library employed a double negative: “no resting of feet on Kick Stools™” was “not allowed,” therefore inadvertently stating that it *was* allowed; 2) the items in question were erroneously entitled “Kick Stools™” rather than “Kik Stools™” thereby rendering it null as a significant.

Meanwhile, the opposition—personified in the Dean of Students—maddened at my solecistic line of attack, was also playing the double negative defence, suggesting that the error that forms my second argument cancelled out the error in the first.

There was one book I never took back: *Enemies under his feet: radicals and nonconformists in Britain, 1664-1677* by Richard L. Greaves—an historian renowned for getting his dates wrong.