

Inaugural lecture (2 March 2010)

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One winter day in the last century, an Assinean mystic and philosopher, Erudite Ridiculusis, climbed over the Stone Mountains and emigrated from his native fishing village into the democratic republic of Freedonia. He brought nothing with him but his hat and clothing, his pipe, and a walking stick made from a twisted root. The subsequent effect of his arrival upon the culture of his new homeland and its many souls are by some measures inconsequential, and by other measures utterly miraculous.

The culture of Freedonia, at this time, can be characterized by three intersecting vectors. First, its people shared an *unmitigated optimism* with regard to their own potential, despite the fact that they never produce anything of any intellectual or cultural significance. (I am setting aside, of course, the rich and enduring achievements by the rejects of Freedonian society, such as its prisoners, exiles, and malcontents.) Second, the Freedonians had successfully developed the *advanced technology* required for a stable and enduring social structure in which very few of the needs of its citizenry went unmet. The third vector was *an astonishingly short cultural attention span*, indeed, an attention span so short that one is often left wondering whether the Freedonian culture at lunch could remember what it had for breakfast. (Indeed, some scholars have argued – and not implausibly – that this third vector, the short attention span, actually explains both the unmitigated optimism and the advanced technology.)

These three vectors, when put together, explain the arc of Freedonia's cultural trajectory. Freedonian culture has always been happy, comfortable, and unburdened by even its most recent past. Its productions, therefore, are typically insubstantial and even evanescent. Many charming observations can be enlisted in order to illustrate this claim. For example, consider the unbelievably short but intense career of the Freedonian singer, Mother T. Mother, who was discovered by a talent agent one Tuesday morning at nine thirty, had major recording contracts by two o'clock that afternoon, had received several national awards by dinnertime; but had been entirely forgotten by the next morning. (He did record one song on an "oldies" compilation later in the same month, and now works for the Department of Motor Vehicles.) A second example is the very existence of "Unfamous Edgar," an elderly gentleman who for a while was revered as the one Freedonian citizen who hadn't had a reality TV show based on his own life. His discovery then prompted the creation of the show "Who's not watching Edgar?", thus undercutting his celebrity status by giving him celebrity status. He was in line for receiving a special television award for not having received any television awards, but was edged out of competition by another man whose name has been entirely forgotten. (And that was last Thursday.) Finally, and most illustratively, we might consider in this connection Freedonia's best-known technological innovation, an internet utility program called "2bz4lf" (or "two-bizzy," as it is commonly known). The program came about once Freedonians recognized that they could not possibly keep up with the continuous barrage of new stars, buzzwords, and literary trends, so a program was developed which continuously searches for new sensations, automatically downloads all of the relevant information, and then immediately deletes that information, without the user ever having to take the trouble to actually track or digest

anything. The utility created so much demand for itself that some Freedomians felt forced to buy two computers: one for playing Tetris, and the other to serve as a dedicated “two-bizzy” search-and-destroy information engine. “You have *no idea* how hip you are” was the company’s tagline.

It was into this maelstrom of the shallow seas that Erudite Ridiculis entered. We know virtually nothing about his first seven years in his new country, apart from an episode scholars refer to as “the salmon incident.” The details over this episode are unclear and need not detain us here; it suffices to say that, perhaps in an act of cultural protest, Erudite tried to either marry a salmon, or transfer the ownership of his official identity papers to a salmon, or possibly convince a court to declare that he was numerically identical with the salmon. The records are not clear, and it is just possible that he tried to achieve all three aims. In any event, he was unsuccessful, and disappeared once again into obscurity. It also is unknown what happened to the salmon.

So we are utterly clueless about what led to perhaps the most notable event in the life of Erudite Ridiculis, which was the development and announcement of his mystical philosophy, or the *Ridiculiad*. The announcement was made at a fishmonger’s shop, posted next to the daily specials (hence the *Ridiculiad*’s alternative name, “The Clam Special”). Despite its inauspicious beginnings, and somewhat incongruous name, the *Ridiculiad* marks the philosophical significance of Erudite, and in fact is the reason I bring him to your attention today.

The *Ridiculiad* begins by positing four claims, known also as “The Four Ridiculous Truths,” which I will recount here with commentary. The first is that

All value lies in the Deep

It is here that Erudite's mystical philosophy sounds the most theological. Erudite was convinced, as he later wrote, that

If human experience is of any value at all – if our lives are not merely passing shadows over the landscape – then its value does not lie in the length of lives, nor the quantity of experience we cram into them; still less the achievements of the species in technology or social institutions; and not even the moral elevation we have yet to attain. Human experience is valuable only in its depth. [*Notebook I*, p. 1]

Erudite also writes that “the Deep,” as he calls it, is a subjective mood one enters through inward reflection on powerful ideas or themes. These ideas and themes, he says, are the ones which connect us with the human origin: what human beings fundamentally are, where we come from, and what ultimately determines the landscapes of our mental lives. He says the Deep is unchanging, that it lies below or beyond appearances, and that when it captures our attention, all other concerns fade in importance. Erudite gives the following examples of deep ideas and themes: that there is anything at all rather than nothing; that suffering can somehow yield redemption; that what is invisible is far more powerful, and more disturbing, than anything visible; and that time is itself a function which transforms possibilities into regrets.

Erudite's second truth, that

humans are capable of depth

perhaps does not warrant much further comment. Erudite did establish an open study group in his apartment above the fishmonger's shop, and any and all interested were accepted into the school, so long as they took their work seriously. The group would meet to study and argue over great literary and philosophical texts. It seems that students would engage in this activity for anywhere from five to ten years before either vanishing into obscurity or producing great works of their own – or, at any rate, attempting to produce such works, which were then read by the next generation of members in the study group.

Erudite's third truth, that

only the Deep redeems human life

does not appear to add anything to the first truth, that all value lies in the Deep, apart from its specific application to human lives. It is not clear whether Erudite ever believed that other species, such as salmon, are capable of depth.

It is the fourth truth, that

capacity for depth is cultivated through the eightfold path

that leads us into Erudite's specific recommendations for bringing value into a particular human life. The recommendations are specific; though that is not to say that it is easy to

determine exactly how the so-called eightfold path is to be followed. The eight steps are recounted here, all together with some commentary to follow:

- 1. Know thyself**
- 2. Embrace silence**
- 3. Speak truth**
- 4. Become hard**
- 5. Perceive need**
- 6. Love fully**
- 7. Attain clarity**
- 8. Remember death**

Many of these injunctions are perhaps obvious. “Know thyself,” of course, is an ancient maxim associated with the oracle at Delphi, the one who claimed outrageously that no human was wiser than Socrates. Similarly, “Perceive need” and “Love fully,” when Erudite discusses them, appear to be just what St. Paul was thinking of when he wrote that love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (I Cor. 13). To perceive need is to see the world through another’s eyes, and to love fully is to embrace that world and hold it as close to oneself as one’s own. “Attain clarity” seems to mean organizing one’s thoughts about what one discovers in the Deep and stating them simply and unequivocally, even when one discovers contradictory things. (“One can be confused,” Erudite writes, “while being at the same time perfectly clear about the nature of one’s confusion.”)

Two of the commands, “Speak truth” and “Become hard,” are usefully combined in another later writing:

The silence of stones speaks volumes. It is difficult to be in their company for long – because their stoic stillness is so inhuman to we whose lives subsist in change. To become hard is to learn from the rocks – to wear one’s character through change, in the face of change, to resist the wind, the sun, and the dark. To be home to mice and junipers and other fleeting lives; to persist in the landscape, and to remain honestly open, come what may. A rock lies exposed – *there* is the fact of it – and it can neither hide from itself nor disguise its features. Becoming hard means recognizing everything for what it is – no false hopes, no convenient fictions, no wishful thinking. Speaking the truth and becoming hard require one another – truth requires hardness and becoming hard means being able and willing to see and speak uncomfortable truths.... Speak as a rock would speak: infrequent, unforgiving, unassailable. [*Notebook I*, p. 26]

There remains, then just the last injunction, which is to remember death. The injunction perhaps sounds cold and depressing. But Erudite seems to have regarded it as essential to keeping any vibrancy in any living moment. He writes:

There awaits for you, even now, a place where you will draw your last breath; your eyes will blink, and see no more. Then silence. No more. The planets will keep spinning, the wheels will keep turning, and all without you, just as they did for the

ages before your birth. Your life is an infinitely brief interruption, a tiny space where you may register your comments. What are *you* doing today? [Notebook I app.]

Erudite thus joins both Socrates and Cicero in seeing the effort to gain wisdom, or philosophy, as practice for death – that is, a sort of life in which one is constantly reconciling oneself to a final nonexistence, and orienting one’s life in such a way as to bring some value – any value -- into what remains. According to Erudite, of course, that means investing one’s life in the Deep; he once called the remembrance of death his “propulsion system” for entering the Deep. When he asks, “What are *you* doing today?”, the answer he has in mind, as the only answer ever worth giving, is this: today I am creating something of eternal value. That means a timeless value, a value that stands independently of everyday or pedestrian needs. For Erudite, every moment given over to something other than the Deep is a wasted moment, a moment which does not register in one’s battle against the dark night. “The significance of our lives,” he wrote, “waxes and wanes with our creations.”

The *Ridiculiad*, consisting of the four truths and the eightfold path remained posted at the fishmonger’s for just over 17 years – an astonishingly long time, by Freedonian standards. Of course, it was also recorded in Erudite’s own notes and in all of the notes of his not-so-many students. They were never published, as none of Erudite’s works have ever been published (apart from a short compilation of great works of western culture, and a preface to an obscure book on Nietzsche). Fifteen years after the posting of the *Ridiculiad*, Erudite sank once again into oblivion, and scholars have not been able to discover where he went or what happened to him. His students have insisted that he designated a salmon to

be the executor of his literary works – no, not *that* salmon, but another one – and in any case that second salmon has long since gone upstream.

I said at the beginning that Erudite's effect upon Freedomian culture was in one way inconsequential, and in another miraculous. It is true that Erudite taught only a small number of students, and his writings never reached anything approaching a broad audience. Soon after the *Ridiculiad* was removed from the fishmonger's sign, life in that neighborhood returned to normal, and the amnesiac forces of that culture washed away any lasting influence he might have had. (Indeed, even during his most well-known episodes, Erudite's influence was slight at best.) But the fact remains that, for a brief time, the tipling waves of that happy but irksome culture were parted, and a few minds sat absorbed in silence, beneath the boundless sky, speaking hard truths to one another, and attempting to gain clarity of mind about the deepest issues. That, my friends, is a small miracle, rarely encountered in any mortal's lifetime.

In closing, I should like to say a few words about my own relationship to Erudite Ridiculosis. Gaining insight, it seems to me, is at all times a result of engaging in dialogue. One engages in a conversation with a friend, where the outcome is what neither expected, and what neither could have produced alone. Humans, it seems to me, are capable of genuine creation, at least when they silence all other distractions and are able to listen to each other. The dialogue can take place here and now, or over the centuries and through books. One simply needs to find the right partner, and there are plenty. In my career as a professor and historian of philosophy, I have had marvelous conversations with colleagues and students, but also with Plato, Spinoza, Descartes, Kant, and Nietzsche (figures Erudite once called "Monsters of the Deep"). But I perhaps have learned the most philosophy from

dear old Erudite Ridiculous himself. What he wrote sometimes seems as close to me as anything I have ever written, and other times is as foreign and challenging as anything I have seen. I like to pretend he has learned as much from me as I have from him, though that may be only a self-conceit. In any event, I know that we must all find the Deep, and seize the dialogues wherever they are found, and learn what we can, in our efforts to make our lives have genuine significance. For that lesson, which ultimately I learned from him, I am profoundly grateful.