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## My Many Selves

Wayne C. Booth

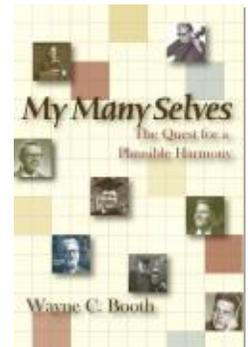
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## Chapter Twelve

# A Wandering Generalist Longs to Be a True Scholar

*From his cradle.*

*He was a scholar, and a ripe and good one;  
Exceeding wise, fair-spoken, and persuading:  
Lofty and sour to them that lov'd him not;  
But, to those men that sought him, sweet as summer.*

—Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*

*I pass for a great scholar with him, by relating to him some of the Persian Tales.*

—Lady Mary Montagu, letter to Alexander Pope

*The world's great men have not commonly been great scholars, nor its great scholars great men.*

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

*The bookful blockhead, ignorantly read,  
With loads of learned lumber in his head,  
With his own tongue still edifies his ears,  
And always list'ning to himself appears.*

—Alexander Pope, "Essay in Criticism"

*Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making.*

—John Milton, *Areopagitica*

Here is a journal entry by the Wandering Generalist, from five years ago.

*November 10, 2000*

This morning as I try to decide what should be the next chapters of the *LIFE*, I am a bit harried—surprise!—by diverse obligations pulling in contrasting directions. Here are some of those that dramatize what may be the subject of the next chapter: my inability ever to pin myself down as a true scholar, a genuine *specialist*. I must, right this minute

- phone a local Episcopalian minister to chat about my upcoming talk at his church, on the relation of scientific and religious rhetoric;
- respond to an editor's highly critical suggestions about revision of an already accepted essay on that subject;
- revise my essay for that (what's-its-name?) encyclopedia, comparing my version of philosophical pluralism with cultural relativism;
- answer a graduate student's request for me to serve on his dissertation committee—he's writing on how scientific prose becomes, when written by the best minds, a kind of prose-poem (and what do I know about that?);
- answer a lifetime acquaintance, now an editor, about why I've never completed the oft-contemplated book about Mormonism;
- work on my talk for MLA, on the movie *American Beauty*;
- respond to the invitation, by Professor X, to do a joint article on the rhetoric of evolutionary psychologists—I'll probably say "no";
- respond to my colleague's nagging me to do a selective anthology of my most "important essays," published and unpublished;
- address the two-foot high pile of manuscripts by friends, former students, and strangers (most of which I actually—and sometimes foolishly—agreed in advance to read).

And it's not just such external demands but also a flood of impulses:

- I must figure out whether to respond to a rejection of an essay, the first rejection I've had in a long time. Do I attack the editor? Throw the draft away? Do another draft?

- I still want to finish one or both of my two totally fumbled novels, *Cass* and *Farrago*.
- As I follow, superficially, our political/commercial scene, I long to work on the half-started book, which was to be called *Fee Speech or Free Speech*, an attempt to rescue the First Amendment from those who think it covers speakers, like tobacco advertisers, who lie deliberately and harmfully for the sake of cash.
- I simply must complete the book, already much too long, on *How Many Gods Are Left After God Dies*: the God of “Goodness,” of personal and social improvement (Communism/Marxism as key example); the God of Beauty (Art for Art’s Sake; my *For the Love of It*); and the God of Truth (science, secular humanism, rationalism).
- Shouldn’t I drop the *LIFE* and work instead on that half-baked book about hypocrisy-upward and how to distinguish it from harmful hypocrisy?<sup>1</sup>

As my young self frequently asked of his journal: what’s the point of all that, sounding too much like a laundry list?<sup>2</sup> Well, let’s push to one side VainB’s boasting about his breadth of interests. My real claim is that by dramatizing the absurdly scattered temptations, I can demonstrate the split, with both self-contempt and some pride, between the would-be genuine scholar and the actual meanderer—the guy I sometimes think of as not just a superficial wandering generalist but a Contemptibly Unfocused Naïve Twister.

Scholars are those who dig deep in one single cavern—and go on digging until they come to layers no one else has even suspected. Nobel-winning scientists win because they have pursued some one quark or boson to its depths (or death). Genuine literary scholars pursue single authors or topics for decades—even for a lifetime.

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1. At almost 84, I decided to return to it, with the possible title “The Curse of ‘Sincerity.’” Total sincerity would destroy us day by day.
  2. Actually it could go on for pages, especially if I listed the “books to be read” in a stack beside my desk. I’m amused that my daughter Alison, a feminist literary critic and scholar of Victorian literature—among other things—writes the following in the margin of a draft: “This doesn’t seem really *scattered*, just active. Wouldn’t *most* good ‘scholars’ in the humanities have a similar diverse set of projects? You dramatize as a distinctive conflict what’s really a feature of academia today.” Perhaps my whole account understates the extent to which even the most serious scholars worry about “wandering” too much. Reading Louis Menand’s new account of nineteenth-century American thinkers, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001), I’m surprised at how many of my intellectual heroes stumbled from field to field at least as loosely as I have: William James, Charles Peirce, John Dewey, et al. Maybe I should blame them for seducing me into “generalism.” Or perhaps I should just erase this whole chapter.

Though I'm sure that most of those "specialists" could construct troublesome lists of demands that get in the way of their central project, some, unlike me, do stick to their center—provoking my envy. They join societies that concentrate on Henry James, or Shakespeare, or Cervantes—or, at the broadest, "Medieval Literature" or "Victorian Feminism." Unlike me, they work up this or that classical language and stick to it through life. They spend years creating a single new edition of one of Shakespeare's plays.

Very little of my work has pursued the decisive conclusions or *proofs* that are pursued by specialists. Most of it has been, as judged by its critics, merely "speculative," "evaluative," "judgmental," "moralistic," even "dogmatic" and "preachy"—what I prefer to call "rhetorical." But VainB has always longed not just to *be* less superficial but to *appear* to be a true scholar.

I find it amusing, though not surprising, that the split between focused scholarship and my actual interests plagued me long before any career choices really emerged. When facing my second college year, I already exaggerated what many sophomores feel as they choose a major:

*Sept. 9, 1938*

Reading *The Horse and Buggy Doctor* arouses a faint desire I have always had—to study and become a research physician. I am still planning to major in Chemistry, but there are so many of the sciences I am interested in, Chem., Physics, Bacteriology (have never studied it) that it worries me for fear I will choose the wrong one. (I would like to obtain my Dr. of Philosophy degree before I terminate my formal education.) I believe the best way to be successful (I don't want to be rich) is to choose one line & stick to it, and not philander from one idea to another. I'm going to have to discipline myself to refrain from doing just that.

As everybody who is anybody knows, genuine scholars in English, especially those specializing in rhetorical studies, are highly trained in other languages, especially Latin and maybe Greek—or at least that was true in my generation. My strongest internal evidence of lifetime failure as a scholar (especially as one pretending to be a specialist in rhetoric) is thus my ignorance of Latin and Greek. My high school offered no language courses in *any* foreign language. (Spanish was offered one fall, but the teacher married and left after the first term.) In college I had only a bit of German and a smaller bit of Spanish. One summer I did try to work up a bit of Latin on my own. In the army, I "got up" some French and conversational German. But I entered graduate school, unlike a majority of my colleagues, with only a hint of Latin, with not even a longing for Greek, and with only the ungrammatical French and German I'd picked up in the army.

Once I decided to become an eighteenth-century *scholar*, I knew that I had to be able to at least pretend to read the many Latin quotations the texts revealed, so I spent quite a few hours again working it up on my own and learning how to find useful ponies.<sup>3</sup> But I never learned to read Latin, really.

Six years after graduation, in England on a Guggenheim fellowship, I decided that my scandalous ignorance should be wiped out. I was a fake scholar and must become genuine. I learned that the London County Council offered free courses, including Latin, and I phoned to inquire.

“Oh, I’m sorry, sir, but the course has already been going for one week, and we do not accept late registrants.”

“I understand that, madam, but I’m not just a plain beginner. I’ve done a Ph.D. on eighteenth-century British literature, and I’ve worked up quite a lot of Latin on my own.”

Short pause. Then a haughty dismissive tone:

“Sir, one does not work up Latin on one’s own.” Click!

So the temptation to become a “genuine” scholar—at least in visibly testable terms like Latin—was crushed. Only occasionally through the remaining decades have I felt tempted to settle in on Latin, or Greek, or—at one point—Russian. The wanderer always triumphed.

I do feel a bit comforted when I happen upon complaints by true scholars about their lack of depth or their ignorance of this or that “other field” or their failure to keep a sufficiently clear single focus. For all I know, every scholar feels some sense of shallowness or inadequacy.

Recently, as I read George Steiner’s memoir *Errata*, I was not surprised to find piles of evidence about the superiority of his education over mine. But I was shocked, after pages and pages that illustrated that superiority, to find him lamenting his ignorance as compared with genuine scholars. Steiner regrets not having learned Russian or Hebrew. He echoes my lament here by blaming himself for having been a polymath, knowing about too many things but never going deeply enough into any one of them to suit the specialists. If someone as learned as Steiner has such regrets, why should I complain about my shallower education?

For whatever reason, I still do. One voice has constantly nagged, “You’re not sufficiently prepared for *that* project.” Then I would be tempted to fix things by narrowing down in some one scholarly territory, what might be called the “Twenty-Year-Perseverance-Bug.” I did feel like a concentrated

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3. Chatting with three college students recently, I learned that none of them knew the word “pony”: secret translation used to deceive language teachers.

true scholar for a while when working painstakingly on my dissertation on *Tristram Shandy*. For many months I reread that amazingly complex novel, hoping to discover its “unity”—unity that we were taught should be the center of genuine critical inquiry. After I submitted a first draft *proving* that the book was, at least in Sterne’s view, completed, if not unified, Ronald Crane, who had inspired the unity quest, shocked me by saying that it would not do because it wasn’t scholarly enough, only critical.

“Your dissertation has got to have some genuine solid historical inquiry in it; your critical ideas will be dead and forgotten within ten or twenty years, so you must include some chapters that yield survivable historical *truth!*” So I then worked ten hours a day for four more months tracing Sterne’s predecessors and influences, probing territory that nobody else had ever probed so deeply; that seemed then and seems now to be true scholarship.

But when my mentors said that the results were good enough to be published after some revision, I decided against it. The thinker in me was nagging about “higher things,” more controversial or challenging issues: how fiction works; why novels, including *Tristram Shandy*, grab us; why public education doesn’t improve; how freshman composition could be better taught; and on and on. Meanwhile another Self nagged daily, “You must become a novelist” (see chapter 13). I was so little interested in the factual side of things that when an author later published a book plagiarizing heavily from the facts in my unpublished dissertation, I didn’t utter a word of complaint.

Here’s how my roiling mind reported itself at age thirty. It was that first year at Haverford College when I was suffering both competitive anxieties and a bit of postpartum depression. “Now that the dissertation is completed, where is my center?”

I’ve waited to write this [journal] entry until the other side of my present “manic-depressive” state turned up. Tonight I am manic. To feel thirty is to feel fifteen instead of sixty. Vast energies, disorganized as adolescence, seem mine. Projects unnumbered and unnumberable chase one another in my head—all demanding to be begun at once. What this will end in I know in advance: another depression, because none of the projects will have been accomplished. What to do about it—how to become thirty rather than 12 or 65—I don’t know.

My activities of the evening, with the “projects” stimulated by them, should give a fair idea of the state I’m in (Phyllis is ill from pregnancy, I bathe Kathie and put her to bed).

And then he lists, for the hundredth time in his life, a baker’s dozen of absolutely irresistible “projects,” most of them stimulated by reading a recent issue

of the *New Statesman and Nation*; every article seems to have drawn him in. He's trying to write his report with ironic amusement, but the projects, for a man who has never yet published a critical or scholarly article (only a few spoofs in *Furioso*), are in one sense real. The entry ends:

I idled the whole time (Saturday to Tuesday), and the result is the above insanity, which, as I said, is in the main honestly reported. . . . I didn't mention my sincere desire to cover the history of philosophy, or to write a couple of articles for scholarly journals, but they occurred to me several times during the evening.

For about six years I wandered among the scores of tempting projects, publishing little except those regular brief satires in the journal *Furioso* (later changed to the *Carleton Miscellany*). Few of the projects would deserve the term "scholarly" in *anybody's* definition. My careful note taking during the year I spent "reading ethical philosophy on my own," financed by the Ford Foundation, could not be called real scholarship; it was a quest for philosophical wisdom, something I have no name for (certainly "generalist" doesn't quite fit). I wanted to learn about *everything* but especially the genuine philosophical grounds for ethical judgments—now that God was dead.

Sometimes I did feel, during that philosophical year, somewhat focused for several hours each day, especially as the philosophers' Gods made more and more sense to me, challenging my "atheism." I'm pretty sure that at least sometimes, as I struggled to understand Aquinas or Kant, I thought of myself as a scholar, discovering truth.

It took me some years to realize that my meandering impulses sprang from, or perhaps were even identical to, my rhetorical (my *rhetorological*) effort to understand—and promote—human understanding in every conceivable domain. My two years of hypocritical missionary work, when I was preaching passionately to get believers and doubters like me to talk together productively, had implanted the conviction that the furtherance of understanding was the best of all human vocations.

The trouble with such a pedagogical passion is that it provides no clear limit on the direction of study—no single focus for the "scholar." As Aristotle said, rhetoric has no subject matter; it's universal.

As I worked more and more on the history of rhetoric (never in a fully scholarly way), I soon saw that a serious rhetorician aspires (always hopelessly) to understand everything and everybody and to teach everybody to embrace the same aspiration. WandererB was thus doomed (or liberated, or blessed) to pursue a lifetime of superficial, sometimes openly moralistic, speculative inquiry. Such inquiry could never reach a decisive, empirical

platform of proof. It was moralistic in the sense that explicitly or implicitly its motive was always, like my motive for teaching, Work to Improve the World. Can you pin that man down on any standard chart of life goals—especially scholarly goals? I can't.

I find scores of half-playful journal entries like this one, written a year after two of my books came out and four years before the next one would emerge.

*July 27, 1975 [on vacation in Utah canyon country]*

Awake at 5:30 . . . couldn't get back—mind full now, no longer threatening total sleep: projects, worries, plans of how and what to teach 15 mos. from now.—No, by God, it's only 14 mos!—my year's leave is almost over and I've not written a single book yet!

Say what book, what book.

Then, after reporting ideas he'd run into while again reading the *Times Literary Supplement*,

So, now, a bit too much aroused by . . . thoughts about a bit of everything at once, I seek, for the hundredth time this year, for the steady project that will be mine. I want an intellectual project that would focus my life as clearly, and w/as much excitement *and* chance for *daily plodding movement* as I imagine an entomologist (enty? enta?) finds in settling on spiders—becoming a “spider man”—or an astronomer settling, these days, on X-ray photography. I am spread so thin that when, as during these 4 days of vacation, I am not at my desk, I don't know “what I am about.”

Then after listing various books he had brought along,

I find nothing anywhere suited to help me “answer the next question.” I don't know what my next question is. . . .

Last week, working on M. H. Abrams, I thought: Why not extend my book about diverse prophets [book never realized] into the 19th c., take one in Romantic (Wordsworth), one in high Victorian (George Eliot), one in fin de siecle (G. B. Shaw), one in 20–30 (Bertrand Russell), etc. But this wld leave me . . . spread thinner than . . .

In any case, I need to do no more than pick any *one* author I love and find difficult—

Thus the tempted-in-every-direction guy almost never managed to work for long on any one author, or period, or genre, or archeological dig. The “loving” pursuit of understanding of this or that presumed truth was to him usually more

important than any one bit of hard, solid, but private bit of truth. The moral center was the claim that intellectual understanding is one of the best versions of the Golden Rule: Listen to others as you would have others listen to you. Precise demonstration of truth is important but not as important as the communal pursuit of it. Put in terms of Kant's categorical imperative, When addressing someone else's ideas, your obligation is to treat them as you believe all human beings *ought* to treat one another's ideas. (This did lead me to *try* to understand those authors I discussed—Kenneth Burke, Bertrand Russell, Bakhtin—but it never led me to any moment of the kind enjoyed by one of my students, Robert Denham. After doing a dissertation on Northrop Frye, Frye told him something like “You are the first and only reader who has ever fully understood what I'm trying to say”—and appointed him a lifetime editor of his papers.)

My first book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, which at the time I never would have described in moral terms,<sup>4</sup> was an attempt to answer the question, How do novelists win us into understanding and embracing their worlds? Then for thirteen years, while attempting to get students to pursue mutual understanding, I worked on three books pursuing different versions of “understanding”—what I did not yet call “rhetorology.”

*Now Don't Try to Reason with Me: Essays and Ironies for a Credulous Age* was a collection of essays about the difficulties we face when reasoning together.<sup>5</sup> *A Rhetoric of Irony* was a guide about how to avoid misunderstanding irony and achieve the deep human alliance that *understanding* irony can yield. *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* was an effort to undermine standard “modernist” skeptical, hyperrationalist norms for deciding when to change one's mind.

We need, I argued through all of this, not a rhetoric of skeptical doubt but a rhetoric of *assent*, learning how to find beneath our differences some common ground, usually unprovable, from which our arguments spring.

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4. I did add, very late in the day, a chapter on the morality of narration—too hastily done but an unmistakable prediction of my later works on the ethics of narration.

5. When I came down with a serious illness as the book was about to appear, my journal reads like this: “Still continuing, on and off, the egotistical—narcissistic?—masturbative—pleasure of re-reading *Reason*. . . . I keep looking for flaws—and keep finding them. Chief one: it doesn't ever come to grips with what “reason” can teach about what the world needs *now*—except the need for reason. It avoids the . . . need for a revolutionary way of organizing men's lives together. The defense of reason is sound and even moving, . . . but it is not made by a man who could guide the world out of its many messes. Indeed, the author does not seem to care very much about any but spiritual and moral messes. . . . A strange man, really, whose book could not possibly interest any but a small and narrow-minded [or “moralizing”?] audience. Etc.”

Then I moved on into ever deeper waters, an effort to put it all together into a general theory of human understanding—*Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism*. Some parts of that ambitious book aspired to be scholarly, and some parts seem to me now about the best work I've done. But it has never hooked as many readers as much of my other work. In it I grappled with diverse previous efforts to organize *all* knowledge, with how various “pluralists” had dealt with the diversity, and with how I was to deal with the plurality of pluralisms. Sometimes I find myself thinking, “Could anything be less ‘scholarly,’ more hopelessly ‘general,’ than that?” Yet it was certainly the work that came closest to scholarly aspiration.

Retreating to a slightly less vast territory, I continued the moral quest in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, an effort to deal with every conceivable moral or ethical question that can be raised when we think of narratives as a joining of authors and readers. And, of course, the wandering generalist is still pursuing, even here, the central moral questions: what's good for us and what isn't, and how can we come to any kind of agreement about such questions? (A reader who has read most of my work objects strongly to my refusal to call this one scholarly; but in my view he's also a meandering generalist—though a touch more scholarly than I've been.)

VainB does take some comfort in all this wandering. If hooking many diverse readers were the only goal of critical writing, my choice of the generalist route might come out—to my surprise—looking pretty good. Because of my wandering, I now have responses from current readers in far more diverse areas than would have turned up if I'd stuck with some one author or topic or period.<sup>6</sup> VainB is delighted to encounter large “pockets” of readers who know this or that corner in my tiny pyramid but who haven't even heard of the other corners.<sup>7</sup>

But that's enough Self-touting. The important fact here is that despite the size of his biblio,<sup>8</sup> he is not a genuine scholar and often longs to have been one. Many colleagues who see themselves as “genuine” have suggested that he's just the shallow, fake kind. Usually the suggestion is only tacit, as when a concentratedly scholarly historian friend said recently, “I just feel awful about how much *knowledge* the world will lose when I die, all that's in

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6. I feel proud to report that one careful reader has complained that I have so little here about my publication life—the meaning, to me, of my various projects as I look back on them. I won't surrender, but I feel comforted by his answer to those who think I've offered too much of such stuff.

7. I'm tempted to report here the diverse responses—but I resist.

8. VainB jumps in to say, “You gotta mention your more than two hundred published articles.” How wise of me to clamp him down into this footnote.

my head that I haven't published." As a generalist, I can't think of any package of knowledge that the world will lose. All they'll lose will be a large collection of exhortations—almost all of which duplicate what other exhorters will go on saying.

Sometimes the judgments against my undeserved successes have turned into open attack. Here's the most revealing event, one that feels a bit scarier in memory than it felt at the time.

A colleague, whom I'll call Jack, asked if I'd like to have lunch. The day before we were scheduled, he phoned to ask if I could come to his house instead of the restaurant. I rode my bike to his house and was welcomed in. He seated me in his dining room.

"I'll be with you in a minute; I'll just go and finish preparing the soup."

Jack brings the soup and a couple of sandwiches and sits down opposite me, looking troubled, face flushed.

"You know why I've invited you here, don't you?"

"No, Jack. Why do you ask?"

"It's to tell you how much I hate you!"

Long pause, as I look at him and he looks down at the soup.

"Why are you bothering to tell me about it?"

Short pause.

"Because my therapist told me I should get it out of my system. But it's not getting out of my system. I simply hate you and always will."

Long, long pause. I consider leaving but instead start sipping the soup, wondering about what could be a good way to handle this shocker.

Finally: "Why do you hate me, Jack?"

"Because of your stupid public success, the way your shallow books and articles get all the attention with your silly superficial arguments, while mine, which exhibit genuine thought and deep research, just get ignored. All you have is a grabby style, one that engages readers into *thinking* that you're thinking. I just can't live with the unfairness of it, my powerful mind ignored while your superficial meanderings . . ."

I've found no journal entry to confirm my memories of his diatribe. What I'm sure of is that he went on and on; and when I found that no real conversation was possible, I simply bit my tongue and left, deeply distressed but saying something like "Well, maybe we can talk about it sometime."

Later in the day when I told Phyllis about it she said, no doubt ironically, "It was foolish of you to eat that soup." It hadn't occurred to me that his hatred was deep enough to be dangerous—and I think I was right. If he'd been

an Iago, wanting to destroy me, he wouldn't have invited me to his house for lunch.<sup>9</sup>

Everybody talks these days about how self-destructive competitiveness among overspecialized academics is getting worse. (One reader chimes in, "They just don't know how bad it was in the past.") Some accounts make it sound as if nobody ever thinks about anything except winning over others, whether in fame or money or power. I know, from my half century of working with colleagues who love teaching—both specialists and generalists—that that's a terrible exaggeration. But as I read accounts of what the profession feels like, with academic presses increasingly reluctant to publish even the most excellent works if they won't guarantee high sales, I have to admit a bit mournfully that our cultural drives have moved strongly during my lifetime in the direction of "get ahead, at all costs," ignoring both serious prolonged scholarship and the kind of ethical and formal probing I've engaged in.

Maybe some genuine scholars would agree with Jack that my effort to achieve an accessible writing style was simply a selling out to those drives ("Get an audience, at all costs"). All I can say in reply is the old point made by rhetoricians from at least Aristotle on: if you write something without thinking of *some* audience, why bother?

So where does that leave me today, working from chapter to chapter with this *LIFE*? Well, I confess in total honesty that I fantasize almost daily about settling down and becoming a *real* Shakespeare scholar. But that would get in the way of my desire to go seriously into film studies; the response was so favorable to my MLA talk on the movie *American Beauty* and how my criticism of fiction might relate to it that it's obvious I should now take up a new career as a cinematologist. On the third hand, shouldn't I pursue that project I started a few weeks ago—an in-depth, scholarly study of *musical* harmony—as I worked on my superficial program notes for the Cedille CD of Dvorak's opus 97 and opus 105? Or how about that book on medical ethics and literature that X has proposed? But then I wouldn't have time to do the book on the sadly neglected novels of George Meredith. And it would interfere with my pursuit of other harmonies here.

And besides, after reading yesterday about how many children are dying of starvation at this very moment, surely I should be spending all my time on trying to save some corner of the world.

But what corner?

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9. Incidentally, Jack's alcoholism worsened and he died not long after, leaving me wondering whether I should feel guilty about how my "fame" had tortured him.