

Book Excerpts — PARANOIA AND CONTENTMENT: A Personal Essay on Western Thought

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From the *Introduction*:

Confronting this fundamental paranoia/contentment condition in the West urged me back to the original concept: beside-the-mind thinking potentially leading to imaginative expansiveness. I termed this the "paranoic," and it became my new chief interest. And the post-Platonic notion of paranoia as dis-tracted fears and delusions, upon which nearly every book on the subject of paranoia had focused, I termed the "paranoidic." From the paranoidic, the clinical tradition evolved; for example, paranoid schizophrenia as an acute mental disorder. Overall, the paranoidic condition—in a wider social sense and as a common everyday neurosis—became a serious liability within the modern culture of contentment. . . .

The aim of my book, then, became predicated on this profound shift in the classical Greek world from the paranoic to the paranoidic. In the process, the idea of paranoia itself acted as a cultural lens through which I could reexamine the evolution of Western thought in a way that hadn't been done before.

The following study, then, focuses on key paranoic thinkers and key paranoic moments when Western being seems to journey into the mystical blue. My hope is that this will interest not only scholars but students of the Western tradition and anyone with a curiosity about intellectual and cultural history.

Furthermore, as a work championing the salient moments of the paranoic in Western history, the study itself is written in a somewhat paranoic way, which is why the book's narrator intermixes, into his analysis and argument, brief pieces of fiction and memoir.

Ultimately, the goal is to provide a new understanding for the vicissitudes of Western thought and for the sufferings which have often resulted from the paranoidic displacing the paranoic. Moreover, the very questioning of the Western predilection for the paranoidic means questioning the mental power behind the indefatigable quest for contentment—namely, the Western hierophant, rationalism.

From Chapter One—*Damning the Dialectic*:

If [Jesus] never had to deal with contingency-paranoia, then he never really knew terror, and he never mentally or spiritually suffered. Moreover, if he didn't doubt his godliness, because doubt is wherein faith lives, then he never considered his own madness, and he was no prophet. For prophets know paranoia. It is their ever-arching sea; it engulfs them and sets them free—like Abraham, like Jeremiah, like Kierkegaard. . . .

Thus, Jesus as a man had to channel his "being" through his anxiety of nonbeing. And it is only in this way that we have a mystical story; only then do we have something compelling; only then do we have the penultimate paranoidic tale. Jesus, as a paranoidic, as a swarm of bees, as a man who suffered terrible mental anguish because of his paranoidic illusion, yet who never dropped out for the sake of contentment but rather followed his paranoidic vision through to the end, reprised in resurrection, by virtue of the absurd.

From Chapter Three—*Doom, Providence, Accident*:

I've been thinking lately about the catacombs. I can nearly imagine them . . . and the Romans dancing overhead. The subterranean Christians hardly listened, though, to the debauched pagan footsteps. Yet they were ever so grateful for the sound of those footsteps, and for general Roman revelry, the salacious tremors convincing them all the more to risk everything for the "greater goal"—by the paranoic eye beheld.

From Chapter Four—*Romantic Elisions*:

There is always that moment in the garden . . . Again and again, across the centuries and cultures, right out of the milky myths.

Like Eve and her crisis moment, with most people believing that she chose poorly. But the serpent wasn't lying; Eve did put on knowledge with her power. It's just that her "knowledge" included a moral sensibility, which has been making people queasy ever since.

And Jesus in Gethsemane, and Joan, dreamily conscious just past the noon moment, with the church bells ringing, hearing voices in her garden in the village of Domremy . . . and William Blake standing at dawn, in his vegetable garden in Felpham, hearing the lark sing and smelling the wild thyme, as his moment opened spatially . . . into the mystic blue. "In Felpham I heard and saw the Visions of Albion" (*Jerusalem*, pl. 38, l. 41).

Like Rousseau crying himself senseless under an oak tree, Blake fell unconscious for a moment in his garden path and recovered to find his wife standing over him: "Terror struck in the Vale I stood at that immortal sound." . . .

*In my moment there wasn't any lark singing, which Blake heard, and which Aristophanes claims was there at the Beginning, just as Chaos and Night closed in, its song of inspiration intervening and bringing order and light to all existence; the lark, the oldest of things, Aristophanes says, sang amidst the ancient forces.*

*No, there wasn't any lark for me when I was feeling lost inside Ireland's Kilkenny. I may have heard a dog barking, though, faint and nearly indistinguishable inside the fog and twilight as I wandered the famous castle grounds and strolled under the ancient cypress trees that stood along the River Nore. It was almost a garden there, under the thick branches and the closing canopy of night, with the diabolical fog thick as rain, and nearly as insipid.*

From Chapter Five—*The Jutland Heath*:

Thus, the question returns: which is better—to be free and paranoic, or content and paranoidic?

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), the Danish theologian and philosopher, in his remarkable essay "Dread as a Saving Experience by Means of Faith," offers a quintessential example of paranoic freedom experienced in the midst of contingency on the Jutland Heath. . . .

Thus, the danger in Nietzsche is not in his "revaluation of values" but in wondering if we really are capable of thinking in an ultimately free paranoic manner. In this way, Nietzsche's great virtue is in challenging us, daring us to think the unthinkable, to feel the thrill and dizziness of paranoic journeying.

Might we walk out just a bit onto the Nietzschean rope, suspended between animals and superman, a rope woven of the thinnest filaments and suspended high into the paranoic blue?

And once there—breathing Nietzsche's heightened air—will we find it impossible to ever go back again and feel the same about our beliefs?

From Chapter Six—*The Paranoic as Prayer*:

And Jeremiah, at his visionary best with his words about the potter and the broken vessel (18:3), a vessel we needn't really care about, unless our love is with the paranoic: "And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do so."

Paranoic heroes remake the self out of broken clay in every moment of being, even though the desire to do so may seem like madness; because the prayer for "remaking" is the call of the paranoic; it is Jeremiah's call, experienced as petomai, and suddenly we are flying . . . inside a moment, upon an air of uncertain hopes.