

Salvatore Difalco

Twilight of the Idols

By midnight, Nietzsche had had one too many. The burly barkeep escorted him by the arm to the tavern exit. “*That* is a clever moon,” Nietzsche said. “Follow it home,” said the barkeep.

CIVILIZATION

Freud kept his beard closely trimmed but one morning couldn’t find his beard scissors, a German-made pair he cherished. Despondent, he made a list of possible thieves.

TABAC

Camus knew he should quit smoking. It was killing him. He tried sucking on Fisherman’s Friends as a substitute, with disappointing results. In the end he decided that if cigarettes didn’t kill him, something else surely would.

EITHER/OR

Kierkegaard thought he had beautiful hands, above all else. He had not otherwise been gifted with a shred of physical beauty, hunched and deformed as he was, but his small, clean white hands filled him with an intense emotion verging on vanity. For this reason, he wore gloves for most of his adult life.

WHY

Schopenhauer watched a cat play with a mouse it had caught. The cat shredded the mouse to ribbons but kept it alive for as long as possible. The poor mouse’s squeals and death-struggle deeply troubled Schopenhauer, who later remarked to a confidante, “Should I have stopped it?”

LEECHES

At a symposium in Berlin, where he was scheduled to give a short talk, Spinoza, known as a bit of a prankster, perhaps went too far. He planted leeches in the bed of a colleague sharing a room with him at the Gymnasium where they were boarded. Next morning, the colleague

Kestrel

received quite a shock when he awoke covered in leeches. He was seen running down the Gymnasium halls screaming like a man on fire. "There is no fear unmingled with hope," Spinoza observed.

MRS. JENNY

When Karl Marx lived in Manchester, England, he developed a liking for Rich Tea Biscuits, which he preferred with coffee rather than tea. Coffee, being far more expensive, was harder to come by, but when he could get his hands on some, he liked to drink cup after cup, and crush a few tins of Rich Tea Biscuits in the process. "Nothing human is alien to me," he said to his landlady, questioning him about the rent.

THE DEATH OF IVAN THE MOUSE

Tolstoy had a pet mouse he named Ivan, after the title character of his most famous shorter works. He spent countless hours letting the mouse leap from palm to palm or allowing it to curl up under his thumb. When asked about his little pet, Tolstoy stated, "Something magical has happened to me." A few days later, he was seen walking the streets, crestfallen, mumbling to himself. Someone noticed that he was not carrying the mouse. When asked about it, Tolstoy simply said, "I feel like crying all the time."

THE MOUSTACHE

Picasso liked a glass of wine when he worked. He preferred red but would drink white in a pinch. One day he was out of both red and white wine. He summoned his housekeeper and told her to go down to the bodega to grab a bottle of red and a bottle of white. The housekeeper, a new girl with a moustache and slightly hard of hearing, misunderstood the great artist. She thought he told her to go down to the barbershop and get the moustache shaved off, and for this she took offense.

NERVES

Kafka abhorred wearing socks. He wore them during work hours at the office, but the minute he got home he peeled them off. One day he forgot to wear socks to work. No one noticed. But every time someone came by his desk, he grew so anxious about being discovered his teeth chattered. Asked if he was cold, Kafka said, "I wish everyone would mind their own damn business, you know. People are such nosy-bodies."

SALTS

T.S.Eliot suffered from severe bromodosis. It was so bad, he refused to remove his shoes whenever visiting. When a friend suggested he soak his feet in Kosher salts to deodorize them, he said, “My feet smell lovely.”

FUHGEDDABOUTIT

Generally recognized as the inventor of the radio, and ennobled a Marquis by the King of Italy, Marconi was in fact a bit of an asshole. He left his entire fortune to his second wife and their only child, shutting out the three surviving children of his first marriage. And everyone knows he was an apologist for the Italian Fascists. What most people don't know is that in 2009 Marconi was inducted into the New Jersey Hall of Fame.

OH LES BEAUX JOURS

Samuel Beckett had the annoying habit of chewing his fingernails—that is, until he lost all of his teeth. Nevertheless, the desire to chew the fingernails proved so overpowering, and his fame so over the top, that he was able to hire a local Parisian man to do it for him, that is to say chew his fingernails. “His rates are reasonable,” Beckett conceded, as though others were both paying for and offering the service.

COME ON, MAN

Despite his genius, Albert Einstein never got the hang of poker. One night when he and a group of physicists and PhD students sat down for a game of seven-card stud in one of Princeton's dining halls, he proved to be the fish at the table. He couldn't tell when someone was bluffing or not, and kept forgetting that flushes beat straights. By night's end he'd lost a bundle. And then he got into trouble with administration for staging an illegal gambling event on university grounds. When he tried to argue that poker is not a game of chance but one of skill, he was laughed out of the Dean's office.

1838

Darwin, for all of his intellectual gifts, lacked a sense of humor. While observing an orangutan in a zoo, a colleague quipped that it reminded him of his Uncle Josiah after he'd been into the gin. “Does he get

Kestrel

childlike?” a serious Darwin asked. “Does the orangutan look childlike to you?” the colleague replied. Darwin spent the rest of the afternoon debating with himself whether the orangutan looked childlike or intoxicated.

GALVANIZED

Edgar Allen Poe, who died in clothes that were not his, may well have been the victim of cooping, a form of electoral fraud. A wig found near his body suggests he may have been forced to vote for one candidate multiple times.

CHALK

Charles Taze Russell, the charismatic founder of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, had a shrewish wife, Maria, who wanted greater influence in *Zion’s Watch Tower*, his monthly religious journal. This led to unchristian conflict. As a youth, Charles Taze Russell was infamous for chalking Biblical verses on fences and city sidewalks. During the worst of his marital problems, according to an acolyte, “the faithful and wise servant” ate chalk to keep from using the Lord’s name in vain.

METAFISICO

After World War II Giorgio de Chirico, the pre-surrealist, moved with his second wife, Isabella, to the 16th century Palazzetto del Borgognon near the Spanish Steps. For a time, the ancient house was overrun by mice. Isabella enlisted a local cat to deal with the problem. But after one day, the cat disappeared. And so did the mice. “An inexplicable mystery,” de Chirico remarked. “But everything in the world is a mystery.” Now a museum dedicated to his work, the house is closed on Mondays and Sundays.

AVANTE

The Italian dictator Mussolini was, among other foul things, a terrible driver. This was well known in his inner circle, though he liked to boast that he could have been a professional race car driver in another life. Indeed he was such a bad driver that his mistress, Clara Petacci, refused to let him drive the 1939 Alfa Romeo he’d bought her, even on the night they fled the palace of Milan’s Cardinal Alfredo Schuster, days before they were executed. “*Benito mi fa nervosa,*” she’d said on more than one occasion.

HIPPOPOTAMUS

No one reads Henry James anymore. But at one time he was a near celebrity. While walking the streets of London in the early 20th century, he was accosted near Lamb House, his residence, by a man wearing a Guy Fawkes mask. "I've read your books," the man said. "Bloody Yank." James, who was walking with a young male companion, turned on the masked man with his silver-handled cane. Even Bobbies thought the beating excessive, though justifiable. "I've always been interested in people," James told his young friend, "but I've never liked them."

SURREAL

When asked, after their bizarre meeting in 1973, who was weirder, Salvador Dali or Alice Cooper, a roadie for Alice Cooper put it like this: "Dali doesn't do drugs."

UNGREGORY PECKISH

Abraham Lincoln's large stature and gravitas would suggest a resonant basso profundo that deeply moved the people when he speechified. Indeed, most accounts indicate that his voice was quite high and shrill. Did he know this? The great president died twelve years before Edison invented the phonograph and fourteen years after Herman Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*.

GLOVES OFF

Throughout his life, the last German emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II, tried valiantly to hide his withered left arm, which was six inches shorter than the right. He was often photographed holding white gloves in his left hand to create the illusion of length. In his private chambers, the emperor employed a hand puppet resembling Otto von Bismarck to hide the hand and stage violent little plays.

ARGUMENT FOR A PRIME MOVER

The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel never met a sausage he didn't like. But during his years as headmaster of a Gymnasium in Nuremberg one could say he met his match. Whenever his schedule would allow he'd walk to Fürth, some seven kilometers away, to feast on a genuine *Fränkische Bratwurst* with sauerkraut in the *Fußgängerzone*. Years later, when he served as the chair of

Kestrel

Philosophy at the University of Berlin, he conceded that no sausage in Berlin compared with those of Fürth. “Fair enough to worship,” he wistfully recalled, “divine enough to love.”

WIND

Queen Victoria had a bit of a gas problem. To avoid embarrassment, the court installed a young man, thereafter known as the Royal Cougher, to cough on cue every time the Queen passed gas. When that became too cumbersome and distracting, the Queen was given a squeeze horn, which she could pump whenever necessary. The horn was never given an official title, or acknowledged in monarchical records.

BORGES

All but blind by middle age, Borges often felt he was being observed, despite assurances by family and friends that he was not. But the feeling was so acute he imagined a man into being “in minute entirety” who was always observing him. Indeed, Borges had imagined into being his own doppelgänger. “Jorge,” said the other Borges, “we look shorter in person.”

TIMBUCTOO

The English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson had no ear for dialogue, unlike his more brilliant predecessor, Shakespeare, to whom he was often and unfairly compared. Tennyson’s *Queen Mary* attempts to further the rich tradition of Shakespearean historical drama. But during the play’s opening in 1876, an unnatural amount of helium in the air—later attributed to an accelerated decay of radioactive elements in Britain’s earth-crust—aversely affected the actors’ voices. Theatregoers cracked up. Their laughter, also affected by the helium, did not pass notice of the actors, who struggled bravely to keep in character.

PER L’AMORE DI DIO

It took some time, but John Paul II—owing perhaps to a paucity of perogi in Rome—eventually grew to like pasta, and in the end became a real pasta connoisseur. Some in the Vatican went so far as to call him a pasta Nazi. While not known for his short-temper or anger, one thing that could set off John Paul II was pasta not cooked al dente. Some of the older cardinals and priests preferred their pasta per le gengive, for the gums, but John Paul II would have none of it. “These bloody

Italians should know better!” he was heard shouting, after forking into an especially slimy plate of rigatoni.

EVERYBODY LAUGHED

Among his many peccadillos, American gangster Al Capone liked his pasta alle vongole with lots of grated Romano cheese, an inordinate amount. When a mobster visiting from Sicily expressed disgust at such a culinary faux pas, Capone, ever the wisecracker, told him that unlike Italy, in America all things were permitted, and that if he ever mentioned it again he'd cut off his balls and feed them to him without cheese.

