"How to Love Money without Really Trying": Performed as a Keening Ode to Bill

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"How to Love Money without Really Trying"
Performed as a Keening Ode to Bill

By Sandy Baldwin
SUNY Albany

I. Prelude

A) Before I introduce this rather learned piece of scholarship, I would like to say that it has been sponsored by just about everyone. This leads me to the prefatory quotation—

The eventual objectification of the human product, as commodity in the capitalist system, leads inevitably to ossification of its use value and loss of any ontology of consciousness of the subject, as such. This reification leads to a teleology of totalization that can only be opposed by an insurrectionary counter-force; in this case, class differentiation, as such, is only a possibility through the diversion of large sums of money into numbered Swiss bank accounts and into deep and well-placed pockets. The more things you have, the less you have to think about it.

B) For the sources of quotations, footnotes, and all of that sort of thing, refer to the Bill of Lading, a collection of bibliographico-notations, in a two-volume set, leather bound, only $7.95, that will be published soon after this document. (Basically, it's a list of out-of-date books by dead people.)

C) Of course, in its origin, money was a mnemotechnic device for use in barter exchange. This stone, or whatever, replaced a certain amount of real goods, say cattle, representing them. Thus, in this first instance money exhibited its primary trait: signifying something else that was not currently present. And with the monetary system now in place, the circle is complete, so that the goods and services we now create and supply represent money. We are paid in and desire money, or we could say paid in pure desire, which is money, which in turn is clearly represented by the world around us. With a touch, everything is turned to money, because, remember, nobody beats Midas, nobody. It's just like words, written here to replace me, myself being absent, as if this writing were from me, or spoken by me, as a form of exchange to you, this page being the price, receipt, and spare change between us (you got me real cheap, a bargain); yet at a certain point

Notes from the speech of the Ambassador from Serbocroatia to the United Nations General Assembly

disclosure: Fin de Siècle Democracy
in reading this, you will forget all about me, forget my existence out here somewhere, and listen only to the rustle of the page, the movement of words.

D) Recently heard on the news from Eastern Europe:

We want to be free, to have money, and to buy things, and to be happy.

— Comment from an unnamed Serb

Do these statements go together and/or are they a sentence passed by an "unnamed" Serb, joined by the squiggly farts of commas? One can get lost in their dream of freely flowing cash.

E) Behind and above the sentence spin leaves shot from the broken spines and split backs of books piled in a leaning tower, float, curl in the air. Stick a coin in her slot and start the copulation of capitalism, producing these strewn notes from the crouched woman, old, raggedy, lips sewn shut with red yarn, button eyes. She crouches in a doorway, never aging, remembering only the future, that thick Book, whose pages she rips and displays to the wind in fortune cookie prophecies like these.

F) In fact, I had orange juice and Vienna Sausage for breakfast, and all that follows may be no more than the deposit resulting from the badly ground orange pulp and pork residue that make up this meal.

G) This part is called Ode to Bill. He has smiled on our undertakings.

H) Interlude

1. Accumulate, accumulate, accumulate. Pile these high and you’ve got it. These: it takes hundreds of them to pile up to a foot, an inch, very thin, but very valuable. Six inches in length—though who is counting this? For they say that size does not matter—one or two the other direction, more or less, and paper thin. The green that is found only in the bill. In fact, interwoven red, white, and blue threads, so fine, and unused anywhere else, so that the bill is instantly identifiable as real, no counterfeit. So rare! These green six inches are only valued by their nothingness, their invisibility. And the more you have the less you notice, or are aware, as they become integral parts and measures of your being. In being nothing, they are worth.

2. Annuit coeptis.

3. But it’s George’s eye, staring out at you, that validates it. So the bill could be called portrait of George Washington, in green. And signed by the artist (twice: Secretary of the Treasury and Treasurer of the United States).

4. The secret is to mark each one, and by that sign follow its path, where ever it goes. And there is a path, there is water flowing. Truly, Lao Tzu said, the Dow is like water, spinning wheel of fortune, what goes up must come down, transforming from bull to bear like one of Ovid’s Metamorphoses.

5. This particular one is soiled, a brown stain, perhaps from blood, or mud, or ejaculated from Dr. Rohrschach, falling in liquid traceries to obliterate the series number and part of one of the signatures.


7. Intercourse

a) As I write this, certain of my organs grow in value, elongate, stick out—my nose for one. Perhaps it’s because of the evasive, non-existence of the bill, forcing me into these half-truths, these exuberant tall tales. Or perhaps it’s from the sheer erotic excitement of the dollar bill itself, its feeling and touch. Or it may just be from frequent applications of Miracle-Gro to my pale epidermis. Are these all the same? The story money tells is a mystery, and just as we cannot all withdraw our money from the bank—is it even there? and if not, where the hell is it?—in the same way, we cannot all know the mystery.

b) You love the bill, love it so that you fondle it, run it like a snake winding in through the crotches of your fingers, crease it between the thumb and along the palm. You would like to chew it, imbibe its value, stroke it with your tongue and mingle it with your saliva, and thus perhaps increase your own personal worth, desirability, and fame. You would like to do this, with a strong, hot, sexual urgency and need, but the memory of mother forces you not to, her shrieking as she catches you with a bill at the soft fringe of your lips, slapping it away, because who knows where that money has been. Dirty money. It’s true, where has it been, but this is its interest, circulating, gathering in value, the dirtier the better.

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c) Although there is something about the new bills, crisp, virgin dollars, never having been passed. Rolling them, standing them on end. We can build fantastic bill houses, walls of dollars, as if some Japanese construction, paper partitions hiding in the most delicate, subtle ways all that is of value, daintily concealing what is within, behind interwoven and unique red, white, and blue fibers.

d) Our fingers on the piano keyboard: right F A C E—the Washington gaze, fathering and founding the value of the bill from beyond the grave; left E G B D—or as the teacher says, Every Good Boy Does (Fine), offering each of us the unlimited promise of financial future, success on the market, and lucrative networking, so long as we’re good. Sweet american dreams.

CHORUS
(to be repeated at suitable intervals throughout the Ode)

Bill—you’re the One!
You bring us love, laughter and fun!
You make us rich like Atilla the Hun!
We need you bad, like a sleeping pill!
We’ll even write you in our will!
You’re the One, the invaluable dollar bill!

e) Everything's worth, except for ourselves, every thing priced except for ourselves (incredible: the philosopher's stone, lead to gold, a true philosophy of the world, where all things have a value relative to each other; e.g. lead is worth how much? a certain amount on the AMEX board, and thus has value, alchemy come true) but if we ourselves have no price, have we any thing? Are we priceless or worthless?

f) Paper people, stacked high from our accounts, bonds and savings, slowly raised erect in imitation of life. Consider, for example, stately though rather thin and elongated, Adam "Buck" Smithers-Jones, expatriate Brit and renegade physicist, who jobs on the stock market floor. He follows the mosaic pattern of the sales, curious electron motion of arms waving wheatheads in the breeze, numbers whizzing on the display. A part of this interwoven printed circuit board parallel processor microdokodecimalmathematically theological system, he loves money, and that's the long and short of it all. Why?

g) Florence Henderson, once "Mom" to us all, Bradied in a great chain of being and togetherness, now obsessively scratches and plays Lotto, Crazy 8's, and other "instant winners." Why, when she, of all of us, as Mrs. Brady, was the most desirable, the winningest one?

h) And what of Oscar the Grouch, that unhappiest of urban dumpster campers, green and dripping, lovingly singing "I love cash"? Do we identify with him, wishing to say "Open Sesame" and dive deep into a new can of worms, finding the warm mulch of money at the bottom? And if we do, what does it mean to identify with this puppet? What does it mean we have at hand? A warm covering of red, white, and blue fibers, the woven green of cash?

i) Fictional characters, true, but no more than the ones we get out of bed each morning, dress in costume, paint with makeup, and present to the world, in return for a certain bi-monthly stack of bills. (Not to forget Julie Andrews, when she sings—and, by the buy, she sure was a gold digger, that nun Maria, wasn’t she?—when she sings, the first note is dough.)

j) Are these notes not already spread, leaves into books, tucked into school texts, teaching and winding the white expanse of youth into complex knots, dark writing and spreading green of the bill as it rots?

k) Wherein does it all lead, and who are the mysterious and mystical Illuminati behind the monetary system? What be the names of those unknown Archimagos? In an alternate, more vernacular lingo, who is that Great Artificer, architectonically moving money from numbered account to IRA to insured tax-free mutual fund?

l) Quaalude

i) To the mint, where molten metal, a flow of non-meaning, is poured to create each unique plate, pried out now solid and valuable, imprinted, ready to stamp the fabric of future dollars, rolling runny ink onto George’s face over and over, designed to fade only so slowly, so very slowly. The bills printed off, in sheets, coming from nothing, from nowhere, into the real of the real and the worthwhile.
ii) Here's our Golden Rule, the basis for the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of us, not to mention our very neo-Kantian thoughts:

Pay back others what you owe them.

With the Golden Rule we can measure our heights and weights and distances, finely trace triangulations of the Golden Mean, etc., et alia, and so on, until all things are understood; yet how is this Golden Rule demarcated, or rather calibrated? Not into inches and feet, which the bill itself validates and measures (six inches long, we know) — but doubtless into dollars and sense. And what is behind the Golden Rule? The gold standard? Bullion in Fort Knox?

**Gold Standard n.** A monetary standard under which the basic unit of currency equals the value of and is exchangeable for a specified amount of gold. No longer in use; see cash, credit, IRAs, ATMs, CDs, S&Ls, IOUs.

Now there's something! But that was time ago, in the golden age, not in the swiftly approaching future. The gold is still moved from one side to the other of the AMEX floor, bullioning and bearing its merry way, but moved by no apparent means.

iii) Take note of this: you've noticed but you've never really clued in or commented on the mystical symbology of the back, the hidden side of the bill, where George's gaze never quite falls. A blazing eye that hovers above a foreshorted pyramid, opposite the bald eagle. The Great Seal of the United States. The eye holds the eagle in place, through the authority of its gaze. And the Latin phrases, what do they mean? *Annuit coeptis.* This is not a dead language: here it is, in circulation. *Novus ordo seclorum.* Everywhere, floating above the pyramid the eye in the back of George Washington's head. He sees us all. Symbol of the Fraternal Order of Freemasons, Free and Accepted, the secret lodges of the Masonic Temple, associated order secretly behind and within us all. The apron, the trowel, and the compass, all united under the unblinking pyramid eye. The apron to cover our nakedness, the trowel to shovel our shit, and the compass, to trace our trajectories, to etch the lines of our body. They see us all, following every move and interpreting it by the Code of Hammarubi — valuing our lives in silver and gold.

iv) And if we were to gather select Fortune 400 CEOs in a particular 16th floor boardroom, outfitted with bright lights, nurses, an operating table, Marcus Welby, and sharpened scalpels; and if we flayed them from head to foot, and inside-outed the pelt, and laid it under powerful sun lamps, what then? Would we not—once this human papyrus was dried and legible—read clearly the sub-cutaneous layer of ones, fives, twenties, the scattered fifties, and hundreds; Georges, Andrew Jacksons, etc. etc.? The bill is in the male: these whiteupperclassmaleHarvardgrads truly are made of money, bacteria in their intestines producing 7% interest every so often. We would all, allowing for the proper magnification, find money on us, perhaps only in a tumor or growth, perhaps with a larger excision and proper taxidermy, discovered in a complete limb or organ. A part of us all, the guild we all belong to, of the dollar bill.

v) The old finger to the nose. The secret signs. Colors, gaily patterned on the wall, ceiling or floor, thrown forth from the kaleidoscope. In their signification, colors each have meaning. Red means danger, or stop. Green means go. Time was when the color green suggested nature, leaves, trees. The greening of America. Now it means money. Significations shift, signifiers speed swift. The green gift of non-meaning: money means movement, go.

vi) My writing instrument has now gotten quite long, stiff and hard to handle, so that it is barely signing these notes before me. It may be time for circumcision of this organ, yes, getting messy, each bill I see before me smeared, blotting out George's face, leaving only his leering eyes and wide smirk.

vii) Money travels through us—as the human system—in series of movements, mirroring, in a debased and devalued fashion, the movement of this ode: the focusing of our eyes as we see money; the curling of our tongue as we near it; the itching of our fingers as we grab it; the rumbling in our stomach as we invest it; the hormonal stirring in our pants as we gain interest on it; the rectal release, relaxation in our bowels as we spend it. And sometimes, the wiggling of our
ears as we hear about it; the pounding in our heavenly temples as we lose it.

viii) But you know, money is worth it all, all there is to work for, not for value, or a sense of well-being, or contentment, but to bolster the bank account, pad the wallet, expand the mutual fund. True, it grows, like you, or maybe even me, but there is no family relation, no bloodline in those redwhiteandblue threads, it's something different—and so, we want it, covet it, wish to be related, to marry into money. Money grows, but not on trees, we know this much. Its growth has no visible connection, no ocular proof or link. Our money is not planted on the stock market, but the stock market itself is played, notes rising as we finger our monetary organs, blossoming like winged words, growing, notes spiraling from long tubular organ pipes, shining as they rise above Wall Street.

AND THAT, STOP RIGHT HERE -
GRAB A SEAT, AS THERE'S ALWAYS ONE LESS WHEN THE MUSIC STOPS THAT IS THE AMAZING THING—THE TRUE MODERN MIRACLE: YOU PUT THE MONEY IN THE ACCOUNT AND IT GROWS, NO WATERING, NO FERTILIZER, JUST GROWS! WE THINK IT'S LIKE LIFE, BUT IT'S NOT, WITH NO HUMAN TOUCH INVOLVED AT ALL!! ISN'T IT SCARY ! ! ! AREN'T YOU DISTURBED??

ix) Postlude

—Quite simply, I didn’t plan on writing so long and flatulently organized an essay when I set out. It was really intended as a concise rumination, or shall we say accounting, of the working of the monetary system, focused as a heroic ode to the dollar bill. I started just after breakfast, and before walking down the hill, skirting the garbage can and pink flamingo, in order to fetch the paper; before all this, I began typing, quite sensibly, paper rolled tight in the drum, fingers poised. I poured myself a preliminary cup of hot tea, to loosen the hinges holding shut the doors to my brain. I dipped the teabag in and out of the pale liquid, watching the darker stain spread from the mesh bag, and then noticed that this was one of those bags imprinted with a more or less witty saying. I pulled it out and read -

You will never be at a loss for words

—and as I dropped it back into the cup, this curse went into effect: following the waves that curled on either side, the tea began to rise and flow, over the cup, buoyed by this plethora of words, flowing, spewing, just as a slot machine out of control spreads its coins, over the typewriter, in a spreading tide.

—So now rivet with these words to erect this newly constructed organic metaphor, our mutual and friendly growth fund, hold its warmth that grows through performance rather than planting, cradle the wad of money in our hands, hold it, slowly spent as far as the eye can see and further, beyond semantic horizons. Yet not actually my soft tips fingering the organ, not my chords voicing the rising notes, slowly gaining in interest. No one person playing, if this organ is only a wind chime, who is it that blows? Money is not the thing in itself—where is that ding an sich? Not people, walls, wind, Freemasons; perhaps this ode, or you? —shifting signification sliding like rising and lowering interest, galloping inflation across the Bay of Fundy, so fast that if its not worth the paper it’s written on, then what the hell is it anyhow?

—Master Sun Tzu wrote

Be so lacking in form that you are like liquid. Be so shrouded in mystery, that you are invisible. In these ways you will hold the strings of fate, and the flow of the Tao will go via direct deposit into your account.

—Money takes the u out of guilt. It’s impersonal, that golden edge, only important thing

—Lunch soon, and my fingers are tiring. I’ve been here
a long time, and I keep on burping up the taste of those damned Vienna Sausages. It hasn’t been as long for you; in fact, you’ve made out on this bargain. If only I got paid by the word. Concise, they wanted concise, and this my future, my academic tomorrow. Short said Simons, short, talk about money. But instead, money talks. (And when money talks, General Motors listens.)

—And the Masons know it all, in league with the powers-that-be, in leagues of nations, IMF—get it? —I’m a Freemason. But this is not conspiracy, this is erecting, building, cementing, revelation. Mortaring walls that shelter us from the things outside ourselves. And that wind, whispering through the vents and cracks, is barely noticed, moved through dull riveted ductwork hung from the ceiling. Instead, a span of greenbacks, as far as the eye can see. It’s people like the masons and the IMF that have brought tomorrow into sight, through a green-lined and notarized tunnel with a golden glow, and perhaps a doctor’s slapping hand, a high-five note on your backside, at the end. It’s people like them, and countless others, who brought about this shiny, golden time, and thank God it’s here. Green means go. So polish up your credit cards, keep your accounts well oiled, and your checkbooks balanced. Hop on your bikes and cars. We’ve got cash to flow, and the future to see, I can see it, there it is.

—Postpartum
  * A new cycle of the ages.

The chain of revolutions in Eastern and Central Europe posed again the question of the nature and domain of democracy. People who struggled against the totalitarian state in the name of democracy had to answer the question of what democracy is. In the course of the fight the answer was relatively simple: the reverse image of the existing situation. But after the success the leaders of the underground movement had to cope with the problem of setting up the structure of state and social institutions, while at the same time being under the pressure of hardships of the economic situation inherited after the communist state. The task was even worse because the majority of these countries did not have a strong democratic tradition and even if they did, this tradition had been forgotten. For that reason, the general agreement as to the necessity of creating a democratic state goes along with stormy discussions connected with the real shape of such a state. The countries with a long tradition of democracy have worked out their models for the years of trials and failures and the differences between them reflect this complicated history. People in Eastern and Central Europe do not have enough time to consider various models, as they have to solve their problems now. On the other hand, the success in this enterprise could prove the relevance of democracy not only for highly educated and rich societies but also for societies having much worse conditions. The success is not guaranteed: on the contrary, the voices are rising up in the region that a moderate authoritarian regime could be a better system in these circumstances. Every generalization is, of course, risky as the region is highly differentiated in political as well as social dimensions.

Focusing my considerations on the case of Poland, I would like to separate two topics, namely the categories marking the theoretical field of discussion on democracy and some examples of political activity in Poland. These two topics are, of course, interwoven but not identical, as the first is mainly connected with the intellectual’s reflection on political life, whereas the second is concerned with political praxis. The gap between them is an interesting sign of changes in political thought. Under communist government, democracy was a purely intellectual matter having nothing in common with real life. The collapse of the communist regime had to bring these problems from the domain of thought to the confrontation with real social needs. Presenting two ends of the process of democratization in Poland should, I hope, show the tension between the conceptual framework and the play of political powers.