A Prologue to AXIOMATIC POSITIONS: AN AMERICAN PRIMER OF VALUES

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My mother didn't know Thornton Wilder, but Thornton Wilder knew there were unborn babies in the air. So did my mother, wiping snot from her nose and tears from her eyes, standing at midnight on the streetcorner of a Detroit slum, her father asphyxiated in a taxi-cab during the Depression and her stepfather—wandering carnival barker—unbearably cruel. “Frank'll kill you,” her sister said in their upstairs bedroom. “Fuck Frank. I'll be back when the carnival leaves town.” She slipped out the window onto the porch roof, shinnied down the drainpipe, and hightailed it to a streetcorner three blocks down.

Although I was born on that streetcorner, having passed from the air to my mother’s mind, I wouldn’t drink her milk until years later. Her will was in that milk, and I nearly OD'ed on that set of hopes and expectations, on that transmigratory desire for transcendence. Hell, I didn’t know: I kept sucking. And now it appears it wasn’t all that bad; I've even convinced myself that some chemical knowledge was passed from her milk to my cells, and that in some way or another I've always known about The Primer.

I also tend to think of The Primer as my own unborn baby—but that’s not entirely true. Whenever I brood over this present undertaking, more often than not I affix its beginnings to the fall of a year long past.

It was the last Friday in September and the dorm was nearly deserted, most of the freshmen either reliving old fantasies at a high school football game, or searching for new ones in mixers at Hood, Goucher, Wilson. Down the hall amplified sound. I was sitting on my bed poring over my own current fantasy, road maps, blue and red lines that would lead me away. A knock on the door.

“I'm Chas,” he said, entering. “I'm your neighbor, next door down.”

“You must be the one they call Giant.”

He smiled. “Some of those sons of commuters call me that. But I think you can call me Neighbor. Where you from, anyway?”

“From back home.”
He eyed me a full thirty seconds before speaking. "I don't mean to pry," he said, "but when I walked in I noticed that *Blonde on Blonde* cover thumbackted to the thin strip of wood that was so gratuitously provided in these green cement-blocked cells. I also noticed the road maps, and I have a hunch you know about it."

"Sweet Jesus, Neighbor. Know about what?"

"And I just noticed something else: you can't keep a straight face."

We drank close a case of beer that night, got caught, saw the dean, and blamed everything on the can fairy. Although that night was the beginning of a great friendship, we would not mention *The Primer* again for over half a decade, afraid we would lose it if we talked about it, but seeing finally that we would lose it anyway since the world around us was, well, cracking up. Our youth was nearly gone, our energy was damn near depleted, and many of our friends and acquaintances were retreating to Jesus, yoga, and other such ill-conceived and hasty nirvanas that bore no relation to *The Primer* as we had known it. When we discovered that the former campus head of SDS had become Engineering Consultant for Plastic Paper Clips, Inc., of Metuchen, New Jersey, it was clearly time to take stock and grab hold of what was basic to our lives.

In a letter, Chas said, "The text of *The Primer* is diffuse in its present edition, still to be completed or located, whichever. The basic edition exists in the public schools, johns, and roller rinks of the nation, in cafes that have been by-passed by Interstate highways, in films of Dick Clark's original *American Bandstand*, in all former athletes who pump gas for a living. It exists in Buddy Holly's Adam's apple, to say nothing of Woddy Guthrie's ashes and seed, wherever they are scattered. It exists in all first fucks and in a high percentage of succeeding ones; it exists in cornfields in all seasons but especially in November when the stalks are dead frozen and brittle; it exists in the 'JOHNNY LOVES MARY—1911' scratched into the grain of a wooden school desk. It exists in all urges for going, in all green lights, in all howls and in all goat-cries. It exists in all Bob Dylan albums, though some latter-day cynics claim that these are merely clever cover-ups and that Dylan himself is writing for the Pig Capitalist Primer."

Which wasn't bad for a partial index. But I told Chas that diffuse wasn't quite the right word, since in itself it did not convey the astounding rate of diffusion. That rate was so great that much of the text was being obliterated, as if our beloved *Primer* were some sort of snake, shedding skins even as it multiplied in size. Also, I told Chas to inform any cynics that our old mutual neighbor, Bob Dylan, could by now be condensed into a value, and that he would by God be treated as such.
God bless Chas. In those days he was always a step or two ahead of me. Dylan was the least of his worries. Of more immediate concern was an elusive value, an intruding body in *The Primer’s* sphere. He wrote: “Now we are living through a period of imposed calm, waiting and preparing for something to happen. I do not want to be a passive element, and I suspect you do not either. Although this is an axiomatic position, it’s a real stickler. As far as I can tell, it’s worming its way into the 37th value-slot, immediately following something like ‘Act as if you are a being with integrity, even when you suspect you are not’ and immediately preceding something like ‘Always look your man straight in the eye when you are on defense.’ Now: tell me what this has to do with you and me, and—by simple extension—with anyone else who may be affected.”

And indeed, half my original motivation was simply to help a friend. From my own experience I knew how frustrating it could be to feel the effects of a value, to suspect it was a value all right (though all manner of people would have you believe otherwise), and yet never to know precisely what the value was, or precisely how it was affecting you, or how long you would be under its sign. Working with the clues Chas had provided, I spent weeks puzzling over No. 37—no use. Finally, I advised Chas that all values, under close scrutiny, became both axiomatic positions and real sticklers. I told him that knowing No. 36 and No. 38 would be as close as we would ever get to knowing No. 37 unless (and it was a big unless) we could compile all the values, match them to their numbers, and then see which one was numberless.

To which Chas responded: “You do it. I’m presently in the middle of a lengthy project on Infant Mortality.”

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Okay, old buddy. I did it. Here it is. Without your help it’s obviously not all it could or should have been; it is dedicated to you nevertheless, because when you say you are working on Infant Mortality I have no recourse but to trust you. I had to go it alone, Chas. I didn’t mind that so much since it was in *The Primer* anyway. But then my wife left me and I was forced to do odd jobs of work in order to support a few of my more expensive values. I put up tents at a score of county and state fairs, shelter for some of the Midwest’s most prized pigs. With a different outfit, and for different pigs, I put up tents from one end of Palm Beach to the other. I travelled for a while with a marionette man, and among thousands of children I saw one enraptured face for every ten that were bored. At the construction site of cheaply-built fat-priced apartment buildings, I shoveled sand out of a basement until that seemed as axiomatic as anything else.

Through it all, I came to believe in the inevitability of reality. I saw things happen which had to happen and which could have happened no
other way other than the way, before my eyes, they did happen. In Chappell, Nebraska, I hitched a ride with I. B. Whittaker, a man who had broken his back working on the railroad in Portland and who, driving without the prescribed brace, was trading tools for tanks of gas in order to make it home to his wife and kids in London, Kentucky, in time for Christmas. Night on a highway: the '50 Chevy, knocking at 40 mph, being sucked into the vortex of the Midwest. I poured out the uninteresting angst of a middle-class soul and I.B., face all bone in the light of the instrument panel, told me: do what you have to do, and fuck 'em all what won't let you do it.

I found myself in a brown rented room two-flights-up in Burlington, Vermont, in the dead of the winter when "the heat pipes just cough." I had enough money to last the winter and enough values to insure insomnia. There were so many goddamned values that finally I wrote them all out in red magic marker on 3" x 5" cards. I covered the brown wallpaper with values, and when that was done I stayed drunk the better part of a week, staring at the walls, living at once with all the shit I had lived with at various times throughout my life. It helped. At the end of the week I knew what was important. With sudden resolve, on a Friday evening, I ripped off all the cards that were extraneous, and threw them out the window where they mingled and fell with the snowflakes. There were 51 remaining. Although the real task was ahead of me, embodying those values, showing beyond any reasonable doubt why they were important, I was beginning to feel that 51 was a manageable number, beginning to feel that at long last I had a structure within which to work. In the middle of a sigh of relief there was a knock on the door.

My God. Those tell-tale high cheekbones . . . and if the eyes seemed more oblique than I'd remembered from the pictures, from the various album covers, they retained, nevertheless, vestiges of all she had seen, the colors, details, and ironies of life on this planet: she was lonely. She had just given a concert for free at the University of Vermont which was attended by six people—and even those six were so, so young. She said, only half facetiously, that she was considering going into the business of fulfilling strangers' pipe-dreams, as a means of appeasing her own loneliness.

"Then you don't want me."

With slight bobs of her head she indicated the walls. "I don't?"

"That's my only pipe-dream," I said. "And No. 2 or No. 3, I haven't decided yet, reads: 'You must go it alone.'"

"Then for the sake of loneliness."

"You realize, of course, I'll have to search you. There will be no smuggling values into this room, no further cluttering of my life."

"Did you know you can't keep a straight face? It's becoming." She set her guitar against the bureau and took off her coat. She smiled,
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winked, and said softly, "The snowflakes are very strange, very different tonight. There, the bed, let's please go to bed."

It snowed harder than any time since my youth, when large flakes amassed on the windows of a bakery in Petoskey, Michigan, covering the smudges of nine-year-old faces which just that morning had watched donuts being made. It snowed harder than any time since that time, when walking home alone from a basketball game I pretended I was a fullback like Nick Pietrosante, running, hands clutching at my thighs, churning for the extra yard through snow-plowed mounds on either side of Mitchell Street, falling, sprawling, my laughter graced by yet more snow.

I awoke early Monday morning in Burlington. The snow was stopping and a weak winter light slanted in through the window. The swath of light was just perceptible but I could follow it across the bed, over her warm sleeping body, across two-thirds of the bureau and up one of the walls. The walls, I calmly noted, were no longer white but motley white-on-brown. Panning the room, looking at forlorn values—two here, a clump of three there, hardly a dent in all that brown—I experienced my only moment of real doubt. The storm had passed; there was work to be done. And yet I had no desire to move, as if any movement at that holy time would be irrevocable, as if movement would not only disturb the breathing next to me but would also forever alter the quality of that weak light, shattering equilibrium and plunging the world back into the same old havoc. And, too, I had been fooled: I had searched her and she was clean—so clean that in the space of a snowbound weekend she had become a single living value, a value which threatened to eclipse all others.

I preserved that moment as long as I could; finally, of course, I was absolved of any decision in the matter. The light was changing anyway, becoming stronger, prefacing a bright-blue fifteen-degree day. The streets outside my window were now filled with the sounds of snowshovels scraping sidewalks, of chains crunching over snowpacked pavement, of hearty cries of greeting: industrious Vermonters, trying their damnedest to get to work of a Monday morning. I could do no less. I nudged her gently and her eyes opened. Mustering all the cold blood within me, I said "Get out of my life." Lying on our sides, we glared at each other until finally I cracked, and amended: "If I'm this happy, I'll die before I finish The Primer." She must have understood because she gave me a swift knee to the groin and said "Get to work you son of a bitch."

She got dressed, muttering how she thought Hemingway was dead, muttering of all the fucking kooks who forsake love because they think they can write. . . . She left the room. When I could stand, I removed all remaining cards from the walls, carefully peeling off the balls of masking tape. I sat down at my card-table desk, typed out the title, and
in fifteen minutes did a steady solid one hundred words. I felt cautiously good. Two more paragraphs and I was no longer able to contain my excitement: it was there and I knew that it would come. I was happy all over again, but in a different way. Only one orgasm in my life (see No. 29) compares with the sensation. I was so happy I didn’t mind answering the door, didn’t mind seeing an empty hallway, for sure didn’t mind the large thermos of coffee and the paper bag with two bacon and egg sandwiches and a note which read: “Savor it, sweetheart. See you sometime. Maybe tonight with a fifth of Jack, Black. J.”

It went on like that, Chas, pain laced with euphoria... And so babies die, huh? Yes, yes. Sooner or later. Well here’s this one: too late or in the nick of time? Well, well. Who knows and who cares? I’m serious. You of all people know the book I started with, the potential material. Starting that morning in Burlington, I made thousands of choices, one by one—made my choices with a keen subjective eye until The Primer became mine alone, until it became a chart of my values, a disguised rendering of my life all these years. Which, to be sure, is less than I’d counted on. You’ll notice, too, that No. 37 is ominously blank—for all I know, it melted in the spring back in Burlington, the red magic marker smearing, the once white card disintegrating in pools of slush. I actually find the blank aesthetically pleasing. I have come to look upon it as a wild card of sorts, or a door not yet closed: I’ll be forty next month, Chas, and still, I can’t help but wonder.