

PROLOGUE

Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain.

Thomas Hardy, "Hap"

IMAGINE AN ALIEN WHO VISITS EARTH ONCE EVERY thousand years, a sort of intergalactic park ranger making the rounds, filing reports, just doing his job. Call him O. When he arrives at the turn of the third millennium, O is not surprised to find murder, envy, strife, wars and rumors of wars, vanity and vexation of spirit. His previous visits have led him to expect this of the human race. However, something does puzzle him. Although he finds that humanity has stumbled on the powerful investigative method we call science and, therefore, is experiencing unparalleled prosperity, the intellectuals in the very societies responsible for this happy revolution have adopted a posture of despair.

Seeking an explanation for this strange marriage of prosperity and dependency, O travels to the great universities of the West—but, alas, he is unable to arrange a single conversation with a professor. The intellectuals are either too busy writing carefully worded papers about the epistemological crisis or are so intent on seizing O as "exhibit A" in a fresh defense of cultural relativism that conversation is impossible.

Scratching his head, our bemused extraterrestrial moves on to the neighborhoods of the poor, to the churches, to the shop owners going about their work. One dieting mother complains cheerfully about making ends meet. An old man reading his horoscope grouses about pop culture going "down the toilet." Most, however, aren't sure what the extraterrestrial means by "the loss of meaning" and don't particularly want to figure it out. They're too busy watching the Home Shopping Network, plotting their next fantasy football trade or playing gory video games. "If you want to talk philosophy," an





old fellow tells him, “try one of them fancy coffee shops.”

And so our extraterrestrial heads downtown and enters the first one he sees. There he finds a mixed crowd. A few of the patrons look intensely alive. One of them pores over Yeats, another Pascal; a third scratches the notes of a new song onto the back of a napkin. But for every one of these, there are three striking various poses of exquisite despair over steaming cups of gourmet coffee.

“Why the hopelessness, the sense that life is meaningless?” the alien asks the sullen ones.

They complain about this or that politician, a war here or there. O points out that whereas tyranny and war have always been around, thousands of people sitting around stylish coffee shops complaining about the loss of meaning is new. “I found such despair among a handful of wealthy Romans in my visit before last,” he explains, “but even there it was the exception.”

Finally, a self-published poet in Birkenstocks looks up from his Nietzsche. “Hey alien man, we’re atoms in the void, get it? Dust in the wind.”

Still perplexed, the alien rubs his right head. “How did you arrive at that conclusion?”

The belated beatnik sets down his book. “Science. It’s all been laid out in mathematical equations—survival of the fittest, everything’s relative, indeterminate. You with me? Einstein, quantum mechanics, evolution.”

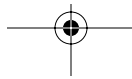
“Scientists said it, you believe it, so that settles it?”

“Not the beaker jockeys. I’m talking about the visionaries—Dawkins, Sagan, Weinberg.”

“And how did they arrive at their conclusions?”

“Why are you asking me? Do I look like a scientist? I’m just a fellow traveler, journaling the ride for the common man, tearing back the veil, the sheltering sky.”

At last O has his answer. Somehow a group of influential human intellectuals have concluded that science has proven that the universe is essentially meaningless. Armed with this insight, he makes further inquiries of the other dispirited people in the coffee shop. They throw out a few catch phrases—“nature, red in tooth and claw,” “the iron chain of causality,” “survival of the fittest,” “might makes right”—but none of them can explain in any detail how science has proven meaninglessness. Finally, an iron-haired religion professor looks over the top of his reading glasses and sighs, his patience all but spent. “It isn’t about ‘proof’ anymore,” he explains, speaking slowly and distinctly. “Rather, each of us must construct our own provisional ‘mean-





ing,' each our own 'truth,' and then dwell in it 'authentically.' " Around the room, heads nod in agreement.

O dutifully records all of this and returns to his ship and his home on the other side of the galaxy. There he tells his people about the strange despair infecting Western civilization in the wake of unparalleled prosperity.

His alien coworkers, however, insist he is pulling their legs. In desperation, he shows them holographic PowerPoint slides of sullen graduate students moping about their Ivy League campuses, soulless modern architecture heaped next to stone buildings older and infinitely more beautiful, book titles testifying to the death of meaning, and wealthy fashion models half-starved and aping death with charcoal makeup. Only then do his colleagues see that O speaks the truth. He reads to them from Stephen Crane, E. M. Forster—all of the modern purveyors of literary despair. The talk concludes with an excerpt from "Hap" by Thomas Hardy:

If but some vengeful god would call to me
From up the sky, and laugh . . .
Then I would bear it . . .
But not so. . . .
—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain.¹

O's coworkers are baffled, groping to understand the source of the despair.

"A poison has entered human culture," O explains. "It's the assumption that science has proven that the universe is without purpose, without meaning—proven it so clearly that one need not even produce an argument."

The extraterrestrials are, of course, fiction. The poison, however, is real. This book is written as an antidote.

¹Thomas Hardy, "Hap," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3rd ed., ed. Alexander W. Allison (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), pp. 494-95.

