

in april of 1981 i was invited to a conference on the avant-garde that was to be held in iowa city and i was a little surprised for all i knew iowa was a state of complacent farmers who raised hogs and corn and had a university whose art and writing programs generated equally bland products at the same time most of the art world seemed to be returning to somewhat less bland but equally predictable painted products so it seemed like a strange time and place for a conference on the avant-garde it was news to me that the university of iowa housed an extensive dada archive and under the shelter of some odd department or other also harbored a group of experimental video artists and tolerated a loosely connected artist performance group so the art historians who managed the dada archive invited a number of other art historians and critics roz krauss ed fry and a few others to talk about the early 20th century avant-garde along with the three richards kostelanetz schechner and higgins and jerry rothenberg and me to give some kind of reading of the contemporary situation.

when i got to the campus a tornado was threatening thunder and lightning were storming outside while richard kostelanetz was defining the avant-garde from the stage of a crowded hall but the tornado missed us the next day was sunny little ducks were walking around the campus and richard schechner was lamenting a decline from the traditions of the heroic avant-garde sixties and prophesying our entry into a terrible and dull new time

what it means to be avant-garde

because i knew there was going to be a kind of transition between the readings that i knew we were going to have here and the kind of talking i do i thought i would surprise everybody by bringing a couple of clippings from newspapers and reading from them along with my talking and i decided this improvisatorily in the manner of my talking as i came upon them fortuitously on the plane coming from san diego

i'm something of a newspaper buff and setting off this day in an airplane heading east toward iowa city over denver with a copy of the san diego union something made me want to read this copley newspaper which like many local newspapers once you get past the first few pages is filled with stories of surprising and unlikely things to which i have an attraction as i have an attraction to a newspapers organization an attraction shared by many artists possibly because of its fractured collage-like structure and as we flew out over the rising mountains immediately to the east of san diego i was struck by the title of a one column story

COLOR THE ISLES SOFT PINK

christo the story continued the artist who gave the world the VALLEY CURTAIN in the colorado rockies and the RUNNING FENCE in california now wants to color the islands of biscayne bay pink the controversial artist unveiled his newest project tuesday

how curious this language sounds when you read it out loud

he plans to cover ten uninhabited islands in the bay which separates miami from miami beach with silky soft pink polypropylene fabric because the islands are not entirely uninhabited if one considers all the world's inhabitants something more gets said the effect the artist said would be of a series of glowing water lilies an homage to claude monets water lily paintings

like any artist christo said i will have my water lilies
he said the project would be entitled

SURROUNDED ISLANDS PROJECT FOR BISCAYNE BAY GREATER MIAMI

it would cost from eight hundred thousand to one million dollars and the money would come from the sale of the drawings and collages of the project so its an ecological project of a sort except for the polypropylene the work was commissioned by the

NEW WORLD FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS
and planned for june 4 to june 26 1982 in miami the festival also features new plays by arthur miller edward albee and tennessee williams

theres something about reading newspapers thats like throwing the i ching

now christo also said and this is what i was coming to that he had consulted with environmentalists and government agencies on this project and he had run into no objections though he had not yet secured the required permits

our new department of the interior must have proved fairly easy

according to christo helicopters would drop the fabric onto the islands over a ten mile stretch of bay from downtown miami to sunny isles then a crew of four hundred would pull the pink cocoon into place all at once and his water lilies would then remain in place for two weeks before coming down

it would be enchanting not imposing or menacing

but intimate and lyrical the artist promised

this sounds like my old collage poetry again but i want to consider this from the point of view of questions concerning the avant-garde

now im not proposing christo as an avant-garde artist but if this art is avant-garde its not very challenging to the chamber of commerce of greater miami because the chamber of commerce is perfectly cheerful about it and somebody is running interference for it with the rest of the people of miami probably lots of people though mainly jeanne claude and the work will get done i have no doubt and i have no doubt that it will be juxtaposed with other avant-garde works by arthur miller tennessee williams and edward albee

about the same time or shortly after i came upon another article that raised similar questions for me it was one of those days when i was absolutely starved for news and wherever i looked i found it and this article read

ACTOR KEEPS HIS HEAD BUT KILLER DOESNT

every actor wants to be a movie star says joe spinell and everybody else wants to be in the movies including the usherettes

this is in a section called THE ARTS spinell is a new york born character actor who decided that one way to become a star was to write and produce your own film which he did and he put himself in the lead the film he wrote is called MANIAC and is about a psychotic killer who murders and mutilates beautiful women

spinell gives a learned account of the plot structure its based on modern day killers who had problems with their mothers the style here he turns to film history through the killers eyes is taken from the peter lorre movie M

well maybe lorre is not the auteur but thats all right we're close but unlike the lorre classic according to the writer in the san diego union MANIAC has such an abundance of

blood that it is difficult to get distributed by home box office or any of the other regular distributors in fact the los angeles times in a sudden access of morality has refused to take ads for the film because the victim gets his revenge on the maniac by tearing his head off full camera

why did spinell use so much violence? to compete says the forty year old actor we had to come up with something new

now is joe spinell in the avant-garde making it new? its maybe not clear because joe spinell will tell you "look dont tell me about violence and blood because then i have to talk about ABC and CBS for twenty-two years theyve been bringing us the vietnamese war"

political morality enters here this is a moral form of the avant-garde but he takes this no further just says im making movies for people to enjoy "if you want art go to a museum people give me money to make a movie to make money thats why we're called an industry the movie industry the industry is in trouble and television is partly to blame people are inundated by tv and their brains are numb"

moralizing educational and avant-garde roles are all preempted by movie maker joe spinell there appears to be no place to go here between lyrical intimate commercial avant-garde artist christo and avant-garde didactic moralist commercial shocker joe spinell

and i was thinking about this while i was flying toward iowa and thinking about how everyone was going to be trying to locate the avant-garde and about how almost everyone was going to agree that it would involve either shocking or making it new and that i was supposed to be talking about this too and i realized i was going to be confused because practically every role classically attributed to the avant-garde has been preempted by something else and i reflected that i myself have never really had a clear image of what it was to be avant-garde though ive been thrust into the role often enough to know what it feels like to be avant-garde

a friend of mine had written a book marjorie perloff had written a book dealing with american poetry as a kind of french connection as opposed to the english connection which is conventionally supposed for it in the schools now i personally think there are many roots to contemporary american poetry certainly my poetry and the poetry i admire but i also know what writing a book means in a book you have to organize your ideas pretty much one thing at a time if its an important thing and you want to really get it done and this is a book designed to challenge what i have always thought of as the anglophiliac model of american poetry that is so dominant in those literary strongholds east of the mississippi or the connecticut river north of the monongahela that are so strongly devoted to an anglican passion that they give the impression of some kind of outpost in a novel by huxley or evelyn waugh where the people are sitting around on a veranda sipping their gin slings in the shade of the local textile factory or integrated circuit fabricating plant dreaming of playing polo or cricket or rugby in the greener older playing fields at eton or harrow which they may never have seen being often second generation eastern european jews from brooklyn or queens or lithuanians from indiana or lutherans from wisconsin and somehow there they are gathered on the veranda in new haven or manhattan in memory of the british empire of which they are among the last supports and several columns of which this book is probably intended to take away

or maybe more precisely this book is only bringing the news to these outposts that the british empire has long since passed away and that the messages from england would no longer be coming and had not been coming for a long time and that there was a french connection as there is a russian connection and a spanish connection and for many a chinese connection or japanese connection there are lots of connections in this world but in a book you have to do one thing at a time the world may not happen one thing at a time but in a book you have to tell one thing at a time

and my friend was invited

to washington to be part of a discourse with some of these english emigres and refugees among whom were numbered harold bloom and john holland and richard howard who are certainly distinguished members of the refugee community

now marjorie was giving a talk based on the last chapter of her most recent book *the poetics of indeterminacy* the last chapter of which happens to deal with john cage and with me

and whatever differences there may be between cage and me and these are considerable we were both obliterated by the righteous wrath of harold bloom who had hardly heard more than our names when he denounced the proceedings as ridiculous and us as nonpoets and stormed off the stage

i was told about this performance of blooms and thought it was wonderful and forgot about it but it was not long afterward that i was invited out to the very same place to do a talk performance on the folger librarys little shakespearean stage and it happened that when i came to do the performance i had something serious in mind because a friend of mine had died two or three days before after a sudden and unexpected hospitalization from which we had all hoped she would come out alive and i wanted to make my piece a kind of homage a meditation and speculation on the nature of her life and death

so in the course of things i told her story or what i knew of it and i tried to consider the nature of the fit between the life we lead and the death we get and what i wanted to think about was whether there was such a fit and if there was what kind it was and i did the best i could under the circumstances of being there then which is my image of what an artist does and is somebody who does the best he can under the circumstances without worrying about making it new or shocking because the best you can do depends upon what you have to do and where and if you have to invent something new to do the work at hand you will but not if you have a ready-made that will work and is close at hand and you want to get on with the rest of the business

then youll pick up the tool thats there a tool that somebody else has made that will work and youll lean on it and feel grateful when its good to you for somebody elses work and youll think of him as a friend who would borrow as freely from you if he thought of it or needed to because there is a community of artists who dont recognize copyrights and patents or shouldnt except under unusual circumstances who send each other tools in the mail or exchange them in conversation in a bar

though i had a couple of friends from whom i got a lot of things in the mail who got very nervous about exchanging things with each other because they had ileana sonnabend looking over their shoulders and one of them got so distressed because he had ileana looking over his shoulder forbidding him to collaborate with the other friend that when he wrote the text for the others installation performance he never put his name on it but this is an unusual situation and i only mention it because of that

and i was there in washington doing the best i could borrowing when i could and inventing when i had to and the audience was tolerant and reasonable and listened to me doing the best i could and when i was through there was a small gathering of people who came up to talk with me because when you talk to people they naturally want to talk to you because theyve had some of you presented to them and a discourse has been initiated or suggested at least in my kind of poetry which is intended to open a discourse and not close it a discourse that can go on with or without me once ive contributed to it and the first question that anybody asked me as we were standing around the punch bowl was what do you think of harold bloom?

i said im sorry i dont think of harold bloom they said but could you think of harold bloom? i said i could think of harold bloom i could think of harold bloom if i wanted to you want me to? all right ill try they said what does harold bloom have against you? i

said its not personal they said but he seemed so
angry he thinks i'm trying to kill him its an emigre
condition i said you imagine people are threatening you
from outside and everything outside seems terribly
threatening i dont blame him for being angry if i
thought somebody was trying to kill me i might be angry at
them im not trying to kill harold bloom

they said then
really why was he so angry?

well i said i think hes
suffering from a case of mistaken identity
they said whats

that?
i said first he thinks hes part of a great tradition
hes not second he thinks hes a critic of poetry hes
not and then he thinks he knows what the world of poetry
consists of but he doesnt

they said what do you mean by
that? and i said look years ago the first time i
ever heard of harold bloom he came to my attention by
accident somebody i knew an editor for an east coast
publishing house who now works for the national endowment
said to me you have to read this its extraordinary it
was a work on william blake it was not extraordinary it
was what you would expect from an academic literary critic
with a taste for romanticism a more or less plausible
account of blake as a complex and ironic poet that might have
pleased any new critic except that blake wasnt a catholic
or anglican or even a presbyterian but some kind of funny
homemade secular religionist whose gospel tended
to make most of the new critics laugh both because it was
funny and because they had a strong taste for institutional
orthodoxy

but from harold bloom you dont get a sense that
theres anything funny about casting allegorical epics with a
set of entities that have names like orc and urthona and
oothoon in places or states with names like golgonooza or
ulro which blake comments on through a set of quirky
drawings that make him one of the first and most peculiar
concrete poets to work in english

but from harold bloom you dont get any sense at
all only an explanation so i didnt think he was
extraordinary at all but rather ordinary and like most
academic critics rather useless until he extended himself
beyond romantic poetry or appeared to and offered
what he called a theory of poetry

now its not really a theory
because its not at all testable and has no explanatory
power it is in fact only a suggestion described as a
theory about the way poets who are not yet poets come
to be poets through the poetry of the poets that have preceded
them which as a suggestion is not in itself extraordinary
but in the way bloom works this out which is fairly
extraordinary as a struggle of sons with the ghosts of
their poetical fathers from whom they have learned what
they want their poetry to be and whose poetical powers
they want to acquire and consider their own

now what is
extraordinary is not blooms seedy freudianism the oedipal
struggle between fathers and sons which has continued to
be fashionable in academic literary circles far longer than
its nineteenth-century imagery would suggest but the
object of the struggle a poetical style or perhaps a
poetical content in any case a poetical product that
bloom sees as a kind of commodity over which there is a
copyright dispute

this is quite extraordinary and very funny
especially since as far as bloom is concerned there are
very few of these poetical products and they appear to have
been disputed for centuries since each father had a father
with whom he must in turn have disputed the rights so
poor john ashbery must have wallace stevens for a father
who you may not believe this will have whitman
for his father who will have emerson as his as emily
dickinson will also and pound may have browning who
will have shelley who will have wordsworth who will have
milton who will have spenser who will found the line the
abraham of post-enlightenment poetry

but what is this product
and what use could it possibly be in any time if it remained

the same over all that time three drastically different centuries

but for bloom time and culture count for nearly nothing cabalists and calvinists english lords brooklyn journalists hartford insurance executives and new york art critics as poets confront nothing but death and the crises of the personal ego so the whole line of blooms contending "strong poets" turns out to be only the textbook version of english romanticism suitably trivialized and egotized by bloom and called the tradition

now i have very little interest in what anybody would call a tradition and no interest in anything you could call a canon but i can see the service bloom has rendered graduate students of english literature he has reduced for them the great number of poets to a handful of "strong" ones who turn out to be the most familiar ones of the textbooks and set his students to work finding their poet fathers for which task he has equipped them with a mongrel array of greek and hebrew technical terms useful i suppose mainly to console them for their lack of ability to read in any other language than english

while for the rest of the general educated public if they read him he has created the consolatory sense of the increasing belatedness and progressively more attenuated virtues of each successive generation of poets from blake and wordsworth to the present encouraging this reader or nonreader to take comfort from his ignorance of the dozens of contemporary poets working in his language that it would most probably not have been worth his trouble to make their acquaintance at all

and thats what i told this man in washington or something to that effect and what i realized as i said it then and realize as i say it now there is something of an idea of the avant-garde in harold bloom however inverted and even he seems more at home with it than i am a notion of first comers whose achievements were new and blocked the way to further achievements along the same path an idea of patented inventions each one acting as a roadblock and the

tradition as a series of bitterly fought retreats till the last "strong" poet finds himself like kafkas rodent or a beckett character backed into the last corner of the room its a funny view of a tradition having it back you into a corner and comically a little like clement greenbergs version of modernist painting in which the brilliant achievement of one artist closes an avenue to the next but actually rather more like the architecture of florence where genius has choked up the traffic and wont let you renovate the streets

but at least the tradition of art history is based on a serious cultural ideology on the preeminence and power of the nineteenth-century industrial state that traced the marvel of its own spiritual development in a history that began with an ingenious geography

for as michel de certeau has pointed out in his great book on "the writing of history" all history begins with geography first you mark out the place where it all happened and this demarcation of the historical place creates along its boundaries the nonhistorical place where nothing has happened in any developmental way and there is no history only anthropology because there are only the customs and traditions and rituals that maintain the primitive traditional? self because history is the allegorical epic of the development of the civilized citizen self

so art history has been worked out as a fantastical progress from the fertile crescent to egypt in a few skips across the mediterranean to greece over the adriatic to italy across the alps to culminate in paris or perhaps london or berlin from ur to the eiffel tower or if you choose literature from nimrod to arnold bennett or thomas mann which in the interests of a purely illusory sanity is foreshortened in the schools and taught as the tradition of painting from giotto to picasso which is no less maniacal only less intelligible because it reduces hegels outrageous but understandable pilgrimage from slavery to the freedom of the german state to an intellectual rubble or pile of bric-a-brac

which is a junk heap not a tradition and to which the only adequate response may be nietzsches comment that german culture and education for this read european institutionalized culture is no culture at all only a deeply entrenched barbarism but of course in the united states institutionalized culture is not a deeply entrenched barbarism it is only a sickly barbarism barely clinging to the saddle

so when it speaks or groans which is perhaps more appropriate for harold bloom of its tradition it is not speaking from any particular institutional authority just a provincial place in new haven

which is why i do not normally think of harold bloom and his tradition except as an entertainment and as somebody asks me in the present because all that unites us in this country is the present and the difficulty of recognizing it and occupying it which is why its so easy to slip into prophesy and the emptiness of the future that is so easy to occupy because of its emptiness that we fill up so quickly with a cargo of memories and attendant dreams

so just a moment ago richard schechner was trying to tell us about the present state of the avant-garde and gave us a cautionary account of how everything in theater and performance now was a decline from the revolutionary great old days how even the best of the new artists are merely indulging in degraded versions of the great techniques of the revolutionary predecessors instead of carrying on and developing the tradition while even the best of the old are no longer capable of going on in their avant-garde way but are at best repeating themselves and then he cautioned us that the loss of this tradition of the sixties would cost us dearly as the new fascism of the reagan government was almost upon us and we would once again need revolutionary artists to lead a new resistance

and i marveled to hear this nostalgic account of the great past and cautionary account of the terrible future accompanying so trivial a grip on the present in

the mouth of an avowed member of what for the lack of a better term we could call the sixties avant-garde but maybe thats the problem with the notion of the avant-garde that it turns itself from a discourse into a tradition whose members worry about its decline in a threatening future and maybe thats why i'm such a poor avant-gardist because i'm mainly concerned with the present which if i can find it might let me know what to do and as for the future it will find us all by itself whether we look backwards or forwards it will be there at the top of the stairs meanwhile i want to occupy the present

and what is it at this moment in the united states a rocketing inflation that no particular politician can make anything other than a rash claim to understand a rising unemployment that anyone can understand and underestimate as they understand because as the number of people who lose their employment increases so the number of people who are no longer eligible for unemployment compensation who become demoralized and no longer appear at the unemployment offices looking for employment or the help they can no longer receive increases as well and these people disappear from the numbers of the unemployed as they cease to be counted among the job hunting poor who as they are no longer counted dont count and become some kind of indefinitely numerous ghosts who no longer live in our affluent or struggling economy but trouble it mysteriously nonetheless

and if for a long time i didnt know what it meant to be haunted i begin to know it now in the present even as i read the newspapers or walk down the street looking for it and i pick up my hometown paper the san diego union and read about the grant hotel

now the grant hotel used to be the only tall building in san diego it wasnt very tall it was about ten stories tall but for a long time it was the tallest building in sleepy san diego there are a lot of taller ones now but for a certain kind of businessman clientele its had a kind of nostalgia and chic and was considered good for christmas and new years parties and the like though in

the last couple of years it had gotten quite a bit rundown and a new ownership had just taken it over and was planning to spruce it up

and whether in line with this or not the other day they were testing the hydraulic lift for the outside fire escape the mechanism failed and the falling fire escape killed an eighty-five year old man named angel aquinero and his seventy-five year old friend sam marino who happened to be walking by and narrowly missed two twenty-two year olds who scampered out of the way

and while i find the whole story interesting i find it curious that the name of one of the fast twenty-two year olds was jack kemp the same name as the distinguished supply side legislator who had been a fleet footed quarterback behind one of the worst offensive lines for the buffalo bills where he had distinguished himself also for getting the hell out of the way in a hurry and i imagine if the policies he has advocated result in a collapse he will once again be distinguished for getting the hell out of the way in a hurry or a lot quicker than any elderly retired cook

and i asked myself as i was reading the paper how come this fire escape being tested right in the middle of the day on broadway fell on two street smart old men just like that didnt they have any ropes or some sort of barrier and signs warning people away no says the newspaper article there were no ropes or barriers or signs because theres no ordinance requiring them for testing the hydraulic lift of a fire escape

well i suppose not perhaps theyd never had trouble before but then had they had much experience testing it had they ever tested it before did they test it regularly once a year maybe or just suddenly now

because they were renovating and a city agency had just noticed them and required the test but there was nothing about this in the paper either still the paper mentioned two men in street clothes shouting people away

now i have an image of angel aquinero eighty-five years old his hearing

not so terribly good any more concentrating on talking to his friend and listening to him while walking by and when they shout at him he has things on his mind more important than anything two punk kids could be calling out waving rudely at him and samuel marino and he's got a life to live angel its his street and the people of the street recognize this by calling him the mayor the mayor of broadway and i would think that the mayor of broadway deserves more consideration when he's walking down his own street than to be yelled at and have a fire escape fall on his head but the hotel feels justified because it was operating within ordinances that didnt recognize the dignity due the mayor

and as i continued leafing through the newspaper looking for the present i came on some letters relating to the problems of the tradition in the columns of dear abby two letters while i was sitting in the plane thinking about the problems of the avant-garde that from two utterly distinct perspectives raised the problems posed by the present to the tradition

one letter could have been written by harold bloom

"dear abby" it went "i am planning to marry this summer my parents are divorced and my mother is remarried i have my heart set on having a traditional church wedding who should give me away? my father or my stepfather? both consider me their daughter and i love them both equally my mother says the one who pays for the wedding should have the right to give me away probably my stepfather this is giving me an ulcer i've even considered eloping so i wouldnt have to make a choice but i really do want a church wedding

i have a twenty-one year old brother who could walk me down the aisle but he says he'd rather be an usher

please tell me what to do i dont want to hurt any feelings on my wedding day"

but there is a second letter from a totally different point of view and if the first one is harold

bloom the second is a little more like me this letter is from a second wife who writes to console a writer of a previous day who had complained of the problems of being a second wife

"dont despair im also a number two the man i married was previously married to a delightful woman named sue for years my mother-in-law called me sue my name is joan she even gave me gifts on sues birthday she loved sue and she loves me too now im divorced and my ex is presently going with a lady named jean i understand that my former mother-in-law is now calling jean joan joan"

so you can see why for me joan the tradition will resolve itself in the present and all you have to do is find it but if you dont it will find you often quite rapidly and without warning but in any case my feeling is that it will come as it came to me one day recently

not long ago i moved my mother to san diego from brooklyn where she had lived for many years now its a long distance from brooklyn to san diego and the life thats lived here is as different as the climate and i would never have moved her but her life was falling apart or at least she felt that it was she was getting older she was seventy-eight or seventy-nine and the neighborhood that she'd been living in for the last twenty years ocean parkway had been running down and was now inhabited by strangers who she felt were menacing and strange and she was finding it progressively more difficult to manage her daily affairs putting her checks in the bank and taking care of the gas bill and the telephone and the rent so i moved her to an apartment in pacific beach near the bay and i cant really manage her affairs very well but even i can manage them better than she can

and i arranged to move her things from brooklyn and flew out to get her and i installed her in this sunny little apartment on la playa in a small complex of apartments

managed by a very helpful and authoritarian ex-military man who looked out for her and took her shopping when he could and called me when he couldnt and all seemed to be going fairly well

till she began to have problems with the telephone company and san diego gas and electric with whom she quarreled over the bills even when i arranged to pay them and with the bank that she was convinced was defrauding her of her interest so that she went there every day to make sure it was recorded and fought with the tellers when they wouldnt satisfy her and it got so that the tellers would go to great lengths not to have to deal with her because from their point of view she would fly into inexplicable rages over matters they didnt understand and the sight of a little white haired lady in a small brimmed orange cloche hat coming through the doors of their bank would strike terror into their hearts and the more attentive of them catching sight of her coming through the doors clutching her ancient purse to her chest and holding a bundle of bankbooks in her hand would beat it quickly to the john or the coffee machine for a much needed break

and the manager would eventually call me and i would have to drive down with her to straighten things out while they listened sympathetically and i tried to explain to her what they had quite correctly done which only made her angrier because they appeared to be talking to me instead of to her "and its my money" she said

but all this was manageable until she started to quarrel with her apartment manager or until she started to suspect him as she suspected everyone else of stealing from her her money her bankbooks her toothbrush her needles and thread and finally her ice cube trays

at this point i moved her out into an apartment hotel a resident hotel for elderly men and women where they got their meals cooked and served to them their rooms cleaned and beds made and lived with other men and women whose capabilities were not much greater than their own which she might have enjoyed except that she was losing her grip on the present so that it didnt mean much to

her and she complained of it for reasons that seemed odd when she explained them to me

they were prejudiced against her because she was jewish because she was from scranton and she wanted to go back to where her people were in new york and it was useless for me to explain to her that nearly thirty percent of the people that lived in her hotel were jewish that i'd heard them speaking yiddish and i'd heard her speaking with them and that her good friend with whom i'd seen her sitting much of the time was italian but she spoke yiddish too better than my mother who was really a native speaker of english with a pennsylvania accent who had never really learned to speak a fluent yiddish at all

but what good would it do all she wanted to do was go home to the scranton of seventy years ago or the new york of thirty or forty or fifty years ago so i reminded her that all of her remaining relatives were living in miami now and maybe she would like to visit them but that worried her because her sister bessie would be nearly ninety now and sarah must be over eighty-five and sylvia well sylvia

but i had an idea i would call her brother irving who was younger than she was he was taking care of sylvia and living in florida not far from her other sisters she could visit with him and get a chance to see sarah and bessie before they died and sylvia too and the idea of being with her family again her sisters and brother appealed to her because it was her only idea of home so i said that i would call irving because i thought she could manage a plane trip if i put her on the plane at one end and her brother picked her up at the other

and i was about to do this when i got a phone call picked up the receiver and heard a hoarse voice that sounded like a member of the mafia or an italian bookie that i recognized as my uncle irving saying "hello david"

now i hadn't heard that voice for years but this

gentle heavy man spoke with the voice of a heavy there may be something about a person's life that brings one into the world as a heavy maybe running a candy store surrounded by bookies and detectives he had come to sound like one of them developing over the years that kind of cracked and breathy pharyngeal growl that i immediately recognized as my uncle

"hello irving" i said with a confidence that surprised me but not him though i had not spoken to him for nearly twenty years

and he said "listen sonny i know you're taking care of your momma" i said "well she's all right she's not bad" i said "she's in a hotel and she's not too happy because she's not surrounded with family but she's comfortable"

he said "look i know your momma is a difficult person she's never been very happy and i know you're doing your best for her but she's had a very hard life and i think it would do her good to come down here and visit with her family" i said that's a wonderful idea how should we arrange it and he says "look she takes the plane to fort lauderdale i come in and pick her up right away and she'll live the life of reilly"

"the life of reilly" i hadn't heard that expression in years since i was a kid and william bendix played it on the radio in the nineteen forties and my uncle irving was promising my mother a rerun in the nineteen eighties

he said "yeah she'll lead the life of reilly it's beautiful here we'll take her all around she'll see the seashore she'll see all the children and grandchildren the beautiful houses they live in she'll live like a queen"

i said "it sounds good but why don't you call her and talk to her too it'll do her good to hear your voice and give her confidence she may be a little nervous about such a long trip"

"sure sonny i understand but maybe you should give her my number too in case i can't reach her right away

ive got kind of irregular hours im working as a night watchman and sometimes i'm not in"

sure i said ok irving but i knew she'd never be able to make the call though i coached her on how to do it from the pay phone in the hall by dialing the operator and billing the call to me because i knew that she'd lose her confidence or forget altogether but i said sure and a week went by two weeks three weeks no irving and i couldnt figure out why irving hadnt called in all that time

so i asked my mother did you try to call irving and this was a very difficult if not entirely pointless thing to do because having a conversation with my mother about some specific act or event that either did or did not occur in the recent past was difficult because of the way she loses hold of the present about as soon as it goes past and pointless because what she says is so unreliable as she tries to cover up her losses but i tried to find out whether irving had called her or more improbably whether she had called him and she tried to remember or more precisely to answer so we both tried and became exhausted with our effort

she felt spent with the immense effort of struggling with an uncooperative long distance operator who refused to put her through with a signal that didnt lead to a familiar voice at the other side and ended in tears for weeks she had been trying to get irving she had called again and again she was exhausted with all of the trying she was describing and still there was no irving and now she was close to tears because something might be wrong

and while i didnt really believe this i decided to call so i dialed him in the morning and nobody answered i tried again in the afternoon and that night and the next morning and i remember thinking it was strange because i knew that his wife fanny stayed home much of the time looking after my aunt sylvia who had become something of an invalid and spent all of her days on the

couch looking at whatever was on television so i thought it was strange and kept on trying and one day several weeks later i dialed the number and somebody picks up the phone and its a womans voice and i say "hello can i speak with irving" and the womans voice becomes hard and cold and says "is this some kind of joke" and i say "no no fanny is that you?" she says "david? is that you" i said yes and she said "irving died" "what happened?" i said

she said "remember he called you?" "yes" "well that night he went to work at his watchmans job he went out to get a cup of coffee during his break and a car came around the corner and hit him and he got killed"

now i hadnt counted on the presence of fort lauderdale or miami or my uncle who had appeared on the telephone and then disappeared nothing within the horizon of my discourse could have prepared me for that moment with my aunt fanny who had just lost the husband she'd lived with for over forty years and was now on the telephone

and it seems to me that if you cant respond to that youre not in the avant-garde