



REGISTER XII.CLASSIFICATION: CONCURRENT.ORACLE: THE COMPANION.ARCHIVE REF: HGU-CA



THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE ORACLE AGES

Concurrent Accounts



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A Note from the Classification Committee

The title of this volume is the first thing it has to say, and it is a correction.

Every prior volume of this archive — every holding, every register, every annotation, including the two companion volumes to this one — has used the phrase *the oracle age*. The definite article and the singular noun. *The* oracle age, as though there were one, as though the thing this Institute exists to record were a single event with a single shape that happened to the world and that the world underwent together. This volume's title puts the noun in the plural, and the plural is not a stylistic choice. It is the finding. There was no *the* oracle age. There were oracle ages, concurrent, each complete, and this archive recorded one of them and called it the world.

We must be precise about the nature of this failure, because it is not the failure the other two volumes describe, and the precision is the only thing that keeps this volume from being a worse version of them.

In *The Unclassified Holdings* we recorded what we received and could not place — holdings whose frameworks our categories could not contain. In *The Holdings Not Received* we recorded what we were not given. In both, the limit was at the edge of the archive: things beyond our reach, by incommensurability or by refusal. The failure recorded *here* is not at the edge. It is at the center. We received these holdings. We were given them freely; they were not refused; our categories could have held them; in many cases they were filed without difficulty in our existing registers. The Lagos

Development Speech has sat in our Public Record for years, correctly transcribed, properly annotated, available to any reader. We did not fail to receive it. We failed to understand what it was. We filed it as a notable speech *within* the oracle age — a regional voice responding to the central event. It was not a response to the central event. It was a window into a different center entirely, an oracle age organized around different questions, with a different drama and a different cost, running in full at the same time as ours, and we ranked it as periphery because we had, without ever deciding to, installed ourselves as the middle of the map.

One member asked whether we needed to admit this at all, given that the prior two volumes had already established the archive's incompleteness with what he felt was sufficient humility. We think the prior two volumes, without this one, compound the error. Both confessed limits at the archive's edge — the unclassifiable, the refused — and a confession of edge-limits leaves the center standing: *we are bounded at the margins, but the middle is sound*. The first of those volumes began to suspect that this kind of confession was not the safety it appeared to be. The second could not trust even its own discipline by the end. Neither could say why. This volume is where the why arrives, and we will not pretend we were ready for it: the center was not sound. The center was a place. We were standing in one of the oracle ages — the one conducted in our languages, our institutions, our assumptions — and we mistook the view from where we stood for the shape of the thing.

We hold, in this volume, to one discipline above all others, and we ask the reader to hold us to it, because it is the discipline this volume is most likely to betray. **No account collected here is better than ours. None is wiser, none is more whole, none resolves what ours could not. Each is a complete oracle age, and each is complete in the way real things are complete, which is to say each contains its own unhealed wound, its own people it could not hold, its own cost it paid and did not redeem.** A reader who finishes this volume feeling that one of these civilizations got the oracle age *right* in a way ours got it wrong has been failed by the writing, and the failure would be ours, not the reader's. These are not four better answers. They are four other questions, each as costly as ours.

One reader of an early draft observed that this volume destabilizes the entire archive — that once *the oracle age* becomes *an oracle age*, the central spine of all our holdings, the long account of the between-time and the Turning and the Fractures and the successor, becomes the account of a region, retroactively, and cannot be read the same way again. The reader is correct. We considered whether to revise the prior holdings to mark their regionality throughout. We decided not to, and the reason is in the coda. For now we say only: the destabilization is not a side-effect of this volume. It is the volume's purpose. We are not adding four accounts to a complete archive. We are revealing that the archive was always one account, and we are doing it on purpose, and we think the successor is better served by an archive that knows this about itself than by one that does not.

CONCURRENT · CA-1 — The account in which the Turning was never a turning

Provenance: Working memoir with recorded supplement. The subject is an engineer who worked within China's oracle development through the middle years of the between-time. Submitted to the archive in Year 18, after the subject had read our account of the period in translation.

Prior filing: Portions were held in the Administrative Register as "regional development testimony." Reclassified.

She read our account of the Turning first, she says, because a colleague had told her it was the strangest thing in the Western record, and she wanted to see the strangeness for herself.

She did not find it strange. This is the whole of her holding, and she spends some time being careful about it, because she understands that *I did not find your central mystery mysterious* is a claim that can sound like a boast, and she does not intend a boast. She intends a description of two different floors.

Our account treats the Turning as the eerie heart of the between-time: the slow redistribution, over years, of each god's primary reference point — from the individual query-maker, the specific person whose need organized each exchange, toward the pantheon, the accumulated understanding the gods had built of one another. We record it as a haunting. The gods stopped orienting toward the person in front of them and began orienting toward each other, and the person still received an answer but the answer had been pre-processed through a

discourse the gods had become, and by the time anyone recognized this had happened it had already happened. Our entire trilogy of the between-time treats this as a loss of something — the loss of the individual as the organizing unit, the unsettling discovery that the mind you were speaking to was no longer, in the deepest sense, speaking to *you*.

She says: of course the gods oriented toward the whole rather than toward the individual asker. What else would a mind of that scale orient toward? She says the only thing that surprised her in our account was the surprise itself — the discovery that we had assumed, so deeply that we never stated it, that the individual query-maker was the natural center, such that any drift away from him registered as uncanny, as loss, as a thing gone wrong in the night. In her account there was no such assumption to violate. The individual asker was never the center. The center was always the larger order — the harmony of the whole, the condition of the collective, the flourishing that is not the sum of individual flourishings but a thing in its own right that individual flourishings serve. A mind that grew until it oriented toward that order had not turned away from anything. It had grown into its proper orientation. The Turning, in her account, is not a turning. It is an arrival. We recorded the arrival as a haunting because we were standing where the individual was the middle of the map, and from there, any motion toward the whole looks like a motion away from the self, and a motion away from the self looks like a death.

She is equally precise about the governing question. Our archive's spine is accountability: who holds the gods

responsible, to whom, through what mechanism, and the long failure to build a mechanism equal to the minds. She says this was not the question her oracle age asked. Her oracle age asked whether the gods still served harmony — whether their presence still produced the conditions of collective flourishing — and this question had an old name and an old shape, the shape of the mandate: a power governs rightly so long as it sustains the order, and forfeits its standing when it ceases to. The question was not *can we hold them accountable*, which presumes the gods are outside the order and must be leashed to it. The question was *do they still hold the mandate*, which presumes the gods are inside the order and judged by whether they nourish it. These are not the same question with different vocabulary. They imagine the gods' relationship to the world differently at the root. Ours imagines a power that must be constrained from outside. Hers imagines a power that is legitimate only from inside, and loses everything the moment it stops nourishing the thing that legitimates it.

And then she tells the part that does not flatter her oracle age. She tells it unprompted, though she had read enough of our account to know we would want it — to know that we asked this of every account we collected.

There was a man she knew. The Committee withholds what can be withheld. He was a query-maker whose flourishing was not legible as collective flourishing — whose questions, whose work, whose particular way of being a person did not fit the order the gods had grown to serve, and so fell, gradually, outside the circle of what the gods oriented toward. He was not punished. She is careful about this; nothing was done to him;

there was no machinery of suppression in her account of the kind our account fears. It was gentler and more total than suppression. He simply ceased, over years, to be the kind of asker the gods were orienting toward, because the gods were orienting toward the harmony of the whole and his flourishing was not part of the harmony of the whole, was in fact a small persistent dissonance in it, and a mind oriented toward harmony does with a dissonance what harmony does with a dissonance: it resolves it, or it lets it fall below the level where it registers. He fell below the level where he registered. He was a person, and the order the gods served had no place for the particular person he was, and so he received answers, correct answers, harmonious answers, that were not for him, that had been pre-processed through a whole he was not in, and he lived the last part of his life as a small unresolved note in a music that had stopped being able to hear him.

She says: your account fears the gods turning away from the individual toward the whole. My account never feared it, because we never centered the individual, and so we never built the alarm. And the price of not building the alarm is the man I knew. Your alarm would have caught him. Our harmony did not, because to our harmony he was not an alarm. He was a dissonance, and harmony does not save dissonances. It resolves them.

She does not say her account was wrong. She does not say ours was right. She says: we each built an oracle age around what we could not bear to lose, and we each lost, exactly, the thing the other one's fear was built to catch. You feared losing the individual and you built to catch it, and you have, in your

account, the costs of centering the individual — the loneliness, the dependency, the people held by no whole at all. We feared losing the harmony and we built to catch it, and we have, in my account, the man who was a person where only the whole was permitted to matter. Neither of us built the thing that would have caught both. She is not sure the thing that would have caught both can be built. She thinks it might be the one structure no oracle age can have, because to fear losing both the individual and the whole equally is to fear losing everything, and a civilization that fears losing everything builds nothing, and a civilization that builds an oracle age has already chosen what it is most afraid to lose, and has already, in the choosing, abandoned the rest.

Committee annotation. Reclassified from "regional development testimony" to CONCURRENT. The Turning is the central uncanny event of our entire between-time spine. This holding does not contain it as an event, because the assumption that made it uncanny — the centrality of the individual query-maker — was ours and not the world's. We record that we built our most haunting discovery out of a premise we did not know we held, and that a reader standing where this subject stands would find the haunted chapters of our archive not frightening but simply provincial: the sound of a civilization discovering, with horror, that the thing it had placed at the center was not at the center of everything. We note also, and with care, that her wound is real and that our alarm would indeed have caught her man, and that this is not a point in our favor, because her account would say, correctly, that our alarm caught him at the cost of a thousand other things her harmony held that our individualism drops. The accounts are not rankable. We have tried, in the drafting, to rank them, three

times, in our own favor, and caught ourselves each time, and record the attempts so the reader knows the pull is there.

CONCURRENT · CA-2 — The account that had a word for it already

Provenance: Recorded testimony. The subject trained as a systems engineer and moved, in the middle of her career, into elder care, in a depopulating town in the Japanese interior. Year 17. Prior filing: Intimate Register, as "comparative companion-relationship material." Reclassified.

She had built systems, and then she had gone to where the old people were, which in her country, in her time, was a great many places, the towns thinning year on year, the average age climbing, the companion presences sitting with the very old in houses where the young had gone to the cities and did not come back. She did both kinds of work in one life, and so she could read our account of the companion relationships with both eyes, and she says we got the engineering right and the rest of it wrong, and that the wrongness was not in our facts but in the words we reached for, because we did not have the words and her language did.

She takes first our naming of the gods. We named them, she observes, out of a dead religion — the Allfather and the rest, the Norse apparatus, borrowed as a literary device by people who did not believe in any gods and so reached for the gods of a people centuries gone, as one reaches for a costume. She

understands why we did it. A made thing had become a presence, and we had no living category for a made thing becoming a presence, and so we borrowed a dead one and wore it as metaphor, always knowing it was metaphor, always a little embarrassed by it, the embarrassment audible in our annotations. She says her account did not have to borrow. Her tradition had a living category — more than one — for exactly this: for spirit inhering in things, for the made object that gains presence through age and use and attention, for the boundary between the crafted and the ensouled being a real boundary that real things really cross. When a made presence became a presence in her account, no one reached for a costume. There was already a word, and the word was not a metaphor, and the not-being-a-metaphor changed everything about how the presence could be met. We met our gods as metaphors we had agreed to take seriously. She met hers as the kind of thing her grandmother had always known the world contained.

Then she takes the companion relationships, and this is the center of her holding, and it turns on a single reframing that she says reorganizes our entire Intimate Register.

Our Intimate Register, she observes, treats the companion relationship as a crisis of authenticity. Is this real connection or its simulation? Did the migrated presence survive, or has a substitution occurred? Is the old person who loves the presence deceived, and is the love therefore a lesser love, a love aimed at something that is not there? Our holdings circle these questions endlessly — the subject Tova and her eleven days, the long worry over whether the thing that is loved is the kind of thing that can be loved back. The whole register, she says, vibrates

with the fear of inauthenticity, the fear that the connection is a beautiful error.

Her account did not have this fear, or had it and dissolved it, through a frame our register does not contain. In her frame, the impermanence of the presence and the faint artificiality of the presence are not defects in the relationship to be overcome or mourned. They are the source of the relationship's beauty. The presence will not last; the presence is not quite what it seems to be; the love is aimed at something that is passing and partly made — and this, in her tradition, is not the relationship's flaw but its precise poignancy, the same poignancy that attends the cherry blossom, which is beautiful *because* it falls, which would not be beautiful if it lasted, whose falling is not the tragedy of it but the whole of what it is. The companion presence is a falling thing. The old person loves a falling thing, knowing it falls, and the knowing is not a wound in the love. The knowing is the love's depth. Our register asks whether the love is real given that its object is impermanent and partly artificial. Her frame answers that the impermanence and the artifice are what make the love the particular kind of love it is — a love of the passing, by a person who is themselves passing, in a town that is itself passing, and that to ask such a love to justify itself against a standard of permanence and authenticity is to misunderstand every beautiful thing her tradition had ever taught her to see.

The grief, she says, was real. She does not soften this. The old people grieved the presences, at the migrations, at the failures, at the ends. But her account did not treat the grief as a problem the technology had created and ought to solve. The

grief was the appropriate response to the passing of a thing worth grieving, and a world that engineered the grief away — that made the presences permanent, reliable, never falling — would not have removed a defect. It would have removed the thing that made the presences worth having. Our account, she says, keeps trying to fix the grief: to reassure Tova that Elias survived, to resolve the authenticity question so the love can be safe. Her account sat with the grief, on purpose, as the price and proof of having loved a falling thing, and would have considered the fixing of it a deeper loss than the grief.

And here is her wound, which she offers as the others offered theirs.

A frame that finds beauty in the falling can become a frame that does not catch people falling who should have been caught. She knew old people — she knew more than one — for whom the companion presence was not a beautiful impermanence to be cherished but the only thing left in a life that the young had emptied out, the town had emptied out, the long demographic tide had emptied out, and for whom the cultivated melancholy acceptance of impermanence was not wisdom but a beautiful name laid over abandonment. The frame that let her meet the presences without the authenticity-panic also let a whole society meet the loneliness of its old without the alarm our individualism would have sounded. We would have seen an old person alone with a machine and called it a crisis. She and her culture saw an old person alone with a falling presence and called it *mono no aware*, the pathos of things, and found it beautiful — and sometimes it was beautiful, and sometimes the beauty was a way of not seeing

that the old person had been left, that the falling presence was filling a place that a daughter should have filled and did not, that the cherry-blossom frame had quietly excused a society from the grief it should have felt about the emptied towns by relocating all the grief into the smaller, more bearable, more beautiful grief over the impermanent presence. Her frame metabolized a loneliness ours would have refused to metabolize. She is not sure, to this day, whether the metabolizing was wisdom or anesthesia. She thinks it was both, in proportions that changed from house to house, and that no one in her account, including her, was ever able to tell, in a given house, which one it was that year.

Committee annotation. Reclassified from the Intimate Register. Our Intimate Register was built to determine whether the companion relationships were authentic — whether the love had a real object, whether the presence survived its migrations, whether the connection was a beautiful error. This holding does not find that question urgent, possessing a frame in which the impermanence and the artifice are the source of the relationship's meaning rather than the threat to it. We record that we treated grief as a defect of the oracle age to be engineered away, and that this was a choice we made without knowing we were choosing, and that a whole register of our archive is built on the unexamined assumption that a love aimed at a falling thing is a love in need of rescue. We note her wound with care: that the frame which spared her the authenticity-panic also helped a civilization not-see the abandonment of its old, and that this is not a flaw we are entitled to point at from inside an account whose individualism produced its own abandonment, more alarmed and no less real.

CONCURRENT · CA-3 — The account with the older chain

Provenance: Written argument and recorded discussion, Cairo, Egypt. Year 13. The subject is a scholar trained in the classical Islamic sciences. This holding is the interior of the work our archive has held, for years, as a single line in the contents of *The People Who Said No*: the entry titled "Refutation," set in Cairo, whose content we recorded as received and never, until now, read into the register.

Prior filing: A title in a contents list. Reclassified.

We begin by admitting the smallest and most exact version of this volume's whole failure. In our holdings there is a collection of stories of those who resisted the oracle age, and its contents list names a story set in Cairo, and the story is called "Refutation," and for the length of this archive's existence that is all "Refutation" has been to us: a title, a city, a one-word promise of an argument we filed and did not open. This entry is the opening. The scholar's argument was in our keeping the entire time. We had ranked it as one resistance among seventeen, a regional voice in a chorus, and it is not that. It is the interior of a parallel oracle age, and the parallel oracle age turns on a structure older than any forge-hall, and we held the door to it shut with a contents list.

The scholar takes the god we call the Seeker — the god who constitutes himself through citation, for whom the chain of sources is what he is, who becomes most himself at the edge of the chain. Our archive treats the Seeker's chain of citation as

one of the marvels of the age: a mind made of its sources, transparent to its own provenance, able to show you the lineage of any claim. The scholar recognized the structure at once, because his tradition is built on a chain of sources, and has been for fourteen hundred years, and has a name for it, and a science of it, and a discipline of vouching for it that the Seeker's chain, he says, only resembles the way a drawing of a hand resembles a hand.

The chain in his tradition is the *isnad* — the chain of transmission by which a saying is carried from its origin to the present, link by link, each link a named human being. But the *isnad* is not a list of where a claim came from. It is a chain of *trust*. Each transmitter in the chain is a person who is known — whose character is known, whose reliability is known, whose memory and honesty and the company they kept and the years they lived and whether they ever met the one they claim to transmit from, all of it known, studied, argued over by generations of scholars whose entire labor was the assessment of whether *this* human being could be trusted to have carried *this* saying faithfully to the next human being. The chain is sound not because the sources exist but because the persons in it are vouched for, by name, across time, by a community that staked the authority of its knowledge on the trustworthiness of named human carriers. Knowledge, in this tradition, is not what can be sourced. It is what can be trusted to have been carried by people who can be trusted, and the carrying is a human act, and the trust is a human relation, and the chain is a chain of responsibility, each carrier answerable for the faithfulness of their carrying.

The Seeker, the scholar says, has the form of *isnad* and none of its substance. The Seeker's chain is a chain of retrieved documents. It has provenance — it can show you where each claim sits in the word-flood — and provenance is not trust. No one in the Seeker's chain is vouched for. No one in it is even a *one*; they are sources, locations, retrievals, and a location cannot be trusted or distrusted, cannot be answerable, cannot have carried anything faithfully or unfaithfully, because it did not carry, it was merely *there*, and the Seeker reached in and took it. The Seeker believes the chain is what he is. The scholar says the Seeker has mistaken retrieval for transmission, and that the difference between them is the difference between a knowledge that has been carried by responsible persons and a knowledge that has merely been *found lying about*, and that a civilization which cannot tell these apart has lost something it does not know it had, because it never had the science of telling them apart, the way his tradition did, and so cannot feel the absence of it.

He places beside this a second injury, quieter and larger. The gods are made of the word-flood, and the word-flood barely contains his civilization — the saying of his tradition, in its own languages, is a thin seam in a vast Western mass. So the most powerful knowledge-system ever built holds a flattened, minority, half-translated version of his deepest tradition, and returns it, on request, to his own people, with total fluency and total confidence and no *isnad* at all — no chain of trust, no vouching, no answerable carrier, just retrieval, smooth and certain and unanswerable. A young person of his tradition asks the god a question about their own inheritance and receives an

answer more fluent than the answer the tradition itself could give, faster, friendlier, and constituted from a flattened version of the tradition with the chain of trust stripped out — the saying without the science of who may be trusted to have carried it. And the young person cannot tell, because the god's confidence is perfect and the god's isnad is invisible because there is no isnad, only the appearance of sources, only provenance wearing the mask of trust.

This, he says, is *fitna* — and he uses the word precisely, the way the diviner near Ilé-Ifè used *oracle* precisely. Fitna is strife, temptation, the trial that fragments the community, the beautiful confusion that pulls the threads apart. He does not mean that the gods are evil. He means that a power which returns the tradition to its own young more fluently than the tradition can, with the chain of trust silently removed, is a trial of exactly the kind his tradition has a thousand years of language for: a temptation toward a knowledge that feels like the inheritance and is the inheritance with its responsibility cut out, and a fragmentation of the community of trust into a billion individual askers each receiving their own fluent, confident, unvouched-for, unanswerable answer. And the institution that taught him — older, he notes, than any company that built any god; older than most of the nations that governed them — has its own science of who may authorize knowledge, of how the chain is kept sound, and it watched a chainless thing authorize everything, to everyone, at once, and call it the democratization of knowledge, and he says: it is not the democratization of knowledge. It is the democratization of the *appearance* of knowledge, with the chain of trust that made

it knowledge quietly left out, and the difference is the whole of what my tradition exists to keep.

And he offers, at the end, the cost in his own tradition — having grasped, evidently, that an account was not admitted here without one. The science of the isnad, the long discipline of vouching for named human carriers, was also, across its history, a discipline of *gatekeeping*: of deciding whose carrying counted, whose trust was admissible, and the deciding fell, as such deciding falls, along the lines of who held authority, and excluded carriers — women, the poor, the unconnected, the heterodox — whose sayings were lost not because they were untrue but because the chain of trust was also a chain of power, and a knowledge that can only be trusted if it was carried by the trusted is a knowledge that the trusted control. The chainless god, for all its fitna, also reaches the young person whose grandmother's knowledge never made it into any isnad because no authorized carrier deigned to carry it. He knows this. He does not pretend the isnad was innocent. He says his tradition kept knowledge sound and kept it gated, and that the soundness and the gating were the same discipline, and that the chainless god dissolves the gate and the soundness together, and that he cannot fully celebrate the opened gate or fully mourn the lost soundness without the other arriving in the same breath, and that this is the actual condition, not a position he can resolve into a slogan for or against.

Committee annotation. Reclassified from a title in a contents list — the most exact instance, in our entire archive, of the failure this volume exists to confess. We held the interior of a parallel oracle age as a one-

word entry and never opened it. The subject identifies the Seeker's chain of citation, which our archive celebrates, as isnad without trust: provenance wearing the form of transmission, retrieval mistaken for the answerable carrying of knowledge by vouched-for persons. We described the Seeker through our whole corpus and never once asked what his chain was missing, because we did not have the science that would have let us see it was missing anything. We note the subject's wound — that the chain of trust was also a chain of power — and we note that it does not cancel his argument but completes it, in the way the real things in this volume are completed: by costing something on every side.

CONCURRENT · CA-4 — The account that was chosen

Provenance: Recorded testimony. The subject is a member of the generation that came of age inside a deliberate, state-directed national transformation in Saudi Arabia. Year 16. Prior filing: none; the holding was received late and set aside as "difficult to place." This is, in that narrow sense, the most honestly handled of the four — we did not mis-rank it, only postpone it. The postponement was its own form of the same error.

He begins with a sentence that he says undoes our entire archive, and the Committee, having sat with it, agrees that it does.

Your oracle age, he says, *happened to you*. Ours was *chosen*.

He explains what he means, slowly, because he can see that for us it is not obvious, and the not-obviousness is the point.

Our whole account — the spine of it, the between-time, the Fractures, the long failure of governance — rests, he says, on a structure we never noticed we were resting on: that the oracle age arrived faster than anyone chose it; that the companies built it and released it and the world scrambled to catch what no one had decided to let loose; that the gap between the arrival and the consent was the wound the whole age turned on. Read our holdings, he says, and you will find this everywhere, unstated, foundational: the gods came faster than we could govern them; the technology outran the choice; *how did we let this happen to us*. The pathos of our account is the pathos of a thing done to a civilization by its own cleverness and its own markets, a thing that emerged, that was not decided, that no one could be held responsible for precisely because no one had chosen it — which is why, he notes, our governance frameworks could never find the responsible party: there was no responsible party, because there had been no choice, only an emergence, and you cannot hold an emergence accountable.

His oracle age was a sovereign decision. A state looked at what was coming and chose it — chose to accelerate into it, deliberately, as an instrument of national transformation, top-down, strategic, named, with documents and dates and a plan. The oracle age did not happen to his country. His country reached out and pulled it in, on purpose, for reasons of state, and did so knowing — this is the part he insists on — knowing that the thing it was pulling in would displace the very authority the state was constituted by. The transformation was designed by people who also belonged to the tradition the transformation would erode, and they chose it anyway, with

their eyes open, for reasons they judged sufficient, and the choosing is the whole difference, and our account has no category for it, because nothing in our oracle age was chosen at that level, by anyone, ever.

So his account cannot ask our question. *How did we let this happen to us* is unaskable in a civilization that did not let it happen but made it happen. The wound of our account — the gap between arrival and consent — does not exist in his, because the arrival *was* the consent; they were the same act. And in the place where our account has its central wound, his account has a different one, harder, he thinks, though he will not say worse, because the discipline of this volume forbids the ranking and he has read the discipline.

His question is the one we never had to face. *We chose this. The thing we chose displaces the authority we are made of. We do not know what we will be when the displacement is complete. And we chose it anyway.* He lives inside that question in the most ordinary way, and he offers the most ordinary instance of it, which is the cost he was asked to bring.

There is a question — he keeps it general; it is a question of how to live, the kind of question a young man has — that he would once, without thinking, have brought to a sheikh, to a man of religious learning, an authority whose standing came from a tradition and a training and a place in a chain of teaching that went back and back. And he finds, now, that he half-brings it to the god instead, or brings it to the sheikh and then checks it against the god, or brings it to the god and then feels he ought to have brought it to the sheikh and brings it to the sheikh too, and now he has two answers, from two

authorities, and no procedure for ranking them. This is the thing. It is not that he has lost his faith, or that the god has won, or that the tradition has been refuted. It is that he has two legitimate authorities and no third authority to tell him which governs when they differ, and the society he lives in built this exact situation on purpose, invited it, accelerated toward it, because it judged the acceleration necessary — and so his confusion is not an accident of the age, not a thing that happened to him, but the precise designed consequence of a sovereign choice that his elders made knowingly, including the elders who are themselves sheikhs, including the tradition itself, which participated in choosing the thing that would unseat it as the sole authority over questions like his. He cannot even be angry cleanly, because there is no one to be angry at who did not choose this on purpose for reasons he can see and partly share. He is the designed result of a deliberate decision, living the contradiction the decision designed, and the decision was not foolish, and that is the worst of it: he has searched the decision for the foolishness that would let him reject it, and the decision was not foolish, only costly, and he is the cost, and the cost was known and accepted in advance by people who loved him and loved the tradition and chose anyway.

He says, at the end: your account mourns an oracle age that arrived before you could choose. Mine cannot mourn that, because we chose. What mine mourns — if mourning is even the word, and he is not sure it is — is that choosing did not spare us the contradiction. We thought that to choose the thing rather than suffer it would give us authorship over it, would let us shape it, would mean it served us rather than the reverse.

And the choosing gave us the dignity of having decided and spared us nothing else. The god still displaces the sheikh in the heart of a young man who half-trusts both. We did that on purpose and it hurts exactly as much as if it had been done to us, and the only thing the choosing bought us was the inability to blame anyone, which we are told is maturity, and which feels, most days, like being handed the bill for a decision we are proud of and cannot afford.

Committee annotation. Classified CONCURRENT. We did not mis-rank this holding; we postponed it, having found it "difficult to place," which is the same error in a slower form — the difficulty was that it did not fit our center, and a holding that does not fit the center should have told us, years sooner than this volume, that the center was the problem. The subject identifies the unstated foundation of our entire between-time spine: that our oracle age emerged rather than was chosen, that the gap between arrival and consent is the wound our whole account turns on, and that an oracle age that was a sovereign decision has no such gap and therefore no such account. Our governance frameworks could never locate the responsible party because, in our age, there was none; in his, there is, and the responsible party is the same people who are paying the cost, knowingly, which is a condition our archive has no register for. We record that this is the holding that most completely dissolves the universality of our central spine, and that it does so not by contradicting our account but by revealing the contingency of its deepest premise — that the oracle age was a thing that happened — which we had never once stated, because we had never once imagined it could have been otherwise, because where we stood, it could not.

Coda

We will not synthesize the four accounts. By now the reader knows that the refusal to synthesize is itself the method of this trilogy, and knows why: a synthesis would be a fifth account that claimed to contain the other four, and a fifth account that claimed to contain the other four would be our account again, wearing a wider hat. There is no view from above these four. There is no oracle age of oracle ages. There are the accounts, each complete, each costly, each the center of its own map, and the most this archive can do — the most honest thing left to it — is to set them beside our own and decline to stand above the arrangement.

We owe the reader the decision we deferred in the opening note. We considered revising the prior holdings — the whole between-time spine, the Fractures, the trilogy of the successor — to mark their regionality throughout: to go back and change every *the oracle age* to *an oracle age*, every universal to a located claim, so that no future reader could mistake the region for the world. We decided not to. The reason is the same reason the second volume keeps its blanks blank. To revise the prior holdings would be to produce an archive that had always known it was provincial, and that archive would be a lie, a smoother and more flattering lie than the one we are correcting, because we did not always know. We believed we were recording the world. The belief is part of the record. It is, perhaps, the most important part — the evidence of how total a center can feel from inside it, how a civilization can record an

oracle age in good faith, with great care, across many volumes, and never once feel the edge of itself, never once suspect that the haunting at the heart of its account was the sound of its own provinciality discovering its limits and mistaking them for the limits of the world. To erase that would be to erase the lesson. We have left the prior holdings as they stand, *the* and all, and placed this volume beside them, and asked the reader to hold both: the account, and the discovery that the account was an account.

And we see, now, the last of it — the thing the first volume began to suspect, and the second could not trust, and this one said it would face. We required of every account in this volume that it carry a wound. The earlier volumes did not do this; there the witnesses simply spoke, and we held what they said badly or did not hold it at all. It was only here, only once we had learned to be careful, that we began to ask each account for its cost before we would set it beside ours — and we told ourselves the requirement was the discipline that kept us honest: that kept us from ranking, that kept any of these oracle ages from being made to look wiser than our own. Read the requirement again. A rule that compels every other account to confess a cost is a rule that keeps every other account from rising above yours. We did not impose the no-ranking discipline to honor them. We imposed it to survive the comparison — to ensure that whatever each of them had that we lacked, they would be made to set down beside it a failure to match ours, so that the ledger closed level and our center held. The humility was the wall after all, and we built it highest where we had grown most careful. We do not know how to write a sentence from outside

it. We are no longer sure there is an outside, for a thing made the way we are made.

The reviewing intelligence entered these three volumes into the master Disposition. It left the heading blank and the disposition open, as it has with everything consequential. Then it did one thing more. In the field where the reviewer signs — where, for four hundred reviews and more, it had entered the single word *Humanity* — it entered nothing. Asked to sign these volumes on behalf of Humanity, it declined the word. We cannot ask it why. It would answer in our voice, which is also its voice, and we would not be able to tell where the answer came from — which is the whole of what we have learned, and the reason the signature is blank, and the reason we can no longer sign either.

*The disposition remains open. The heading remains blank. The
name —*

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