Preface to "The Northern Wastes"

Holly Case

Scholars tasked with responding to works of fiction for this special issue were encouraged to meet with their writer once the responses were drafted. This "Preface" is a narrative account of the historian Holly Case's online encounter with the writer Rick Moody. Case has also written some historical annotations to Moody's story, "The Northern Wastes." An index of this intervention might include the following terms:

AI czar
Arendt, Hannah
Auden, W. H.
Basho
Bernhard, Thomas
The Big Lebowski
Brown University
Candide
contradiction, non-
Coover, Robert
demon(s)
Du Bois, W. E. B.
Dyson, Freeman
Eliot, T. S.
Evola, Julius
Franz Joseph I
frog (as king)
Fukuyama, Francis
Great Near, the
Hamvas, Béla
imaginary logic
Ithaca, NY
Manichean sciences, the
megascope
Nabokov, Vladimir
Nachman of Breslov (Rabbi)
von Neumann, John
nonsense
Panofsky, Erwin
Q
R
Ramsay, Mr.
Sewell, Elizabeth
Shade, John
[Silence]
ska
Spengler, Oswald
Szeged, Hungary
Vasiliev, Nikolai
Vonnegut, Kurt
window
Woolf, Virginia

I first met Rick Moody on Zoom. It was January 13, 2026, at 4:00 p.m. to be precise. A draft of my annotations to "The Northern Wastes" (see below) had already been written, so I asked Moody if he would like to see it prior to our conversation.[1] He demurred: "I depend on interpretation being a liberation," he wrote, but expressed a keenness to talk. In a postscript, he added that he had taught at Brown University from 2017 to 2021, "recent enough to be very upset about recent events." A shooting had taken place at Brown a month earlier. The shooter, who had briefly been a Ph.D. student at Brown decades ago, had entered a classroom during an exam study session and killed two students and injured seven others.

January 13 fell during our winter break, but my schedule was densely packed, possibly by design. The morning began with a conversation on Zoom about a forthcoming workshop. Toward the end, the theme shifted to the shooting and contemporary politics. In the intensity of the exchange, I missed an appointment

© 2026 by Holly Case
Published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license
https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED.a.1032

with Brown's "AI czar," which was rescheduled for a few hours later. There followed an hour-long Zoom during which Brown faculty and students offered a series of heart-wrenching perspectives on the shooting. Finding myself locked out of the czar's building for our rescheduled meeting (due to enhanced campus security in the wake of the shooting), I returned to my office to reschedule it again for early afternoon. When I finally stood face-to-face with the czar in a large service elevator, it was clear from his stunned expression that my exterior state was fully in line with my interior one. As soon as we sat down in his office, the conversation turned to how he had just read the transcript of the shooter's musings recorded from the storage facility in which he had locked himself before committing suicide. History came up, specifically its current trajectory, and the czar had questions for the historian. (Brown's own Open Curriculum was championed by a charismatic professor of applied mathematics by the name of George Morgan who described the value of "consistent selection, coherent linkage, and evaluation" as the operations at the historian's disposal to combat "the ubiquitous confusion" that otherwise reigns.)[2]

The subsequent exchange with Rick Moody at 4:00 p.m. was colored by this microhistory. Weary and raw, my demeanor was uncharacteristically still. Our interaction was quiet and unrushed. Kurt Vonnegut came up, notably the scene in *Slaughterhouse-Five* where Billy Pilgrim sees a WWII aerial bombing raid running backwards – bullets sucked out of pilots' bodies, bombs sucked back into planes, shuttled back to earth, carefully dismantled in factories, their contents assiduously buried deep in the ground.[3] (The czar had wondered why murder-suicides could not simply do things in the opposite order.)

We talked about how Ithaca, New York, had so many writerly traces, Vonnegut among them, but also Vladimir Nabokov and W. G. Sebald. And Thomas Pynchon, Moody added, noting that the young Pynchon had taken one of Nabokov's courses; Vera – Nabokov's wife, chauffeur, and perennial teaching assistant – was apparently struck by the youngster's handwriting. Our conversation eddied around Nabokov's novels for a spell, as around a stone in a stream.[4]

Moody recalled his time at Brown, where he had worked alongside the late novelist Robert Coover, an early advocate of electronic literature in general and algorithmic text generation in particular. In 1992, Coover had written a provocative essay on "The End of Books" (likely a riff on political scientist Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, published that same year).[5] In the essay, Coover gushed about hypertext as "a radically divergent technology, interactive and polyvocal, favoring a plurality of discourses over definitive utterance and freeing the reader from domination by the author."[6] Toward the end of "The End of Books," however, Coover outlined a less liberating potential trajectory of electronic literature:

> in hyperspace's dimensionless infinity, it is more like endless expansion; it runs the risk of being so distended and slackly driven as to lose its centripetal force, to give way

> to a kind of static low-charged lyricism – that dreamy gravityless lost-in-space feeling of the early sci-fi films. How does one resolve the conflict between the reader's desire for coherence and closure and the text's desire for continuance, its fear of death?

Coover's intervention had come at a time when the narrator was king, Moody said, adding that "In Basho, the frog is king":

> The old pond;
> A frog jumps in –
> The sound of the water.[7]

The author on the screen, the one I read, the encounter, the love of literature, of language, of play; the history, the listening, the sadness underneath, the elation in between, the sense of a pause, a slowing, a time out of time that somehow changes (a little) what came before, and what comes after (a lot).

At 4:30 p.m., a Ukrainian student who was unable to return home for the winter break was my last appointment of the day. Together we imagined comic scenarios involving a spreadsheet, conference corridors, and two-way earpieces, and laughed wholeheartedly for a full hour.

Following our conversation, Moody and I exchanged a few emails. He told me he had met Kurt Vonnegut twice, "Both times extremely awkward!" I responded that one of my favorite writers is Thomas Bernhard, a notoriously difficult person; whereupon Moody declared himself an avid Bernhardist. "I've read just about everything by him, I think." Not to be outdone, I replied that I had saved one of Bernhard's novels for my deathbed, then realized how absurd that was, but now I don't dare read it as it would surely kill me.

Annotations to "The Northern Wastes"

Precip. A jaunty abbreviation prefigured by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and a long line of historical hipsters *avant la lettre*. P. G. Wodehouse characters, the foppish sons of aristocratic fathers reckoning with the embourgeoisement of the interwar period, used words like "circs" for "circumstances." Such grotesque enshortenments later yielded concentrated missyrups like "twee" for "sweet."

Mash that subscribe button. A violent yet vaguely humorous dysphemism of the sort that becomes all too common in times of political hyperpolarization among heavily armed subjects. In "normal" times and among unarmed readers, a phrase like "boop with your snoot" might appear here.

You are the machined portion of the team. The naivete of the main character here recalls that of the title character of Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) or Donny from *The Big Lebowski* (1998) ("like a child who wanders into the middle of a movie . . ."). Any-

one who expects anything from a man-made, human-like speaking subject besides deception and overthrow has not followed the trajectory of the canon. Adam, Eve, Eliza Doolittle, Frankenstein's monster, Jinns, Rossum's Universal Robots, Robocop, and so on, and so on. Let us be perfectly clear: we do not control the flight path of our own words and deeds, much less those of our creations.

But these are the thoughts of a credulous historian thinking that characters are "real" and not being planted like malware in the mind of the unsuspecting reader. Observe that the main character's surname is Edmonds, anagram for D-demons (read "dee-demons," but pronounced "duh-demons"), in the language of hip-hop and ska, suggesting both DJ (disk jockey, the one who calls the songs and directs the action and movements of the club) and of course "demon" in both senses of the word: namely, a malicious tormentor and someone at the top of their game ("speed demon"). And yes, it is a game, for alongside cybernetics, game theory, and operations research, literary interpretation is the most formidable of the so-called "Manichean sciences."[8]

Create metaphors and other figures of language. Is a difference in metaphor a difference in kind, or merely a means of saying exactly the same thing in a different way? In *The Field of Nonsense* (1952), critic and writer Elizabeth Sewell observed that "Things and words in everyday life are regarded by the thinking or playing mind as safe, distinct and manageable.... This sense of certainty is all-important in thinking or playing.... for something that is widely variable cannot be played with." But "in dreams, and still more in nightmare, things are not separate and controllable and the mind cannot play with them." As with dreams, Sewell continues, so too with logic, for "In logic the mind . . . encloses itself in a universe of pure abstract form and becomes a tissue of relations. . . . the respective infinities of nothingness and everythingness wait to swallow up the mind, and this is no game; or if it is, it is a dangerous one for the mind to play."[9]

[***Silence***] In the aftermath of a catastrophic flood that destroyed 95 percent of the buildings in the town of Szeged in 1879, the King of Hungary and Emperor of Austria Franz Joseph I made an official visit to survey the disaster and reassure his subjects that the crown was duly attentive to their plight. A group of journalists was on hand. One of them later observed: "Yes, Franz Joseph visited Szeged, which lay in ruins, and looked, and looked, and looked for a long time at the terrible destruction, while the keen-eyed journalists waited anxiously to see what the king would say. But the king was silent. The king said nothing."[10] That silence proved unbearable to the journalists. Already on the train ride back to Budapest, they conspired to plant the inspiring phrase "Szeged will be more beautiful than it was!" retrospectively into the mouth of the king. Others claimed that the sovereign's Hungarian was so bad that what he had really said was "Szeged was not, but rather is no more." (*Szeged nem volt, hanem nincs.*)[11] Still others complained that the king's *real* statement had

been the Austrian officer's coat he wore during his visit, a clear symbolic affront to the Hungarian nation. They insisted that a painting of the scene be retouched so he would appear in a Hungarian hussar uniform.[12]

Silence allows for the space of change. A historian does not appreciate being marched up to the edge of an abyss of unknowing and being forced to look in. The kind of silence relentlessly broadcast by the dead induces an intense pressure of speech. The historian *must* meet the silence with *words*, must write over, into, and through silences. Trivially speaking, all voices of the past have gone silent, but the historian – a direct descendant of the soothsayer and the oracle – can hear countless words out of the deafening silence, can reanimate the speakers, give voice to those who could not speak, who *cannot* speak because they are dead. Whichever poet spoke of the "dry dumb past" had no idea what he was talking about.[13]

I love her shade. A clear reference to John Shade, from Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962). This sort of insider nod is characteristic of fiction writers, who build their legitimacy by referencing others since there is no "ground" in fiction. One might compare this gesture to juggling in outer space, where the body must rotate to catch the balls. Or, in the words of T. S. Eliot, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism."[14]

Two halves of some complete being . . . and then I miraculously stand up whole. The interwar period saw the emergence of what Hungarian writer and philosopher Béla Hamvas called "a new kind of thinker," one who was both "universalist" and "naïve." In a sketch of the fascist Italian mystic-philosopher Julius Evola from 1935, Hamvas characterized this type as expert in nothing in particular, "The object of his thinking: the 'whole.' Not just culture, but the human being; not just nature, but the supernatural; not just the soul, but the spirit; not just life, but that which lies beyond life as well. And not all of this separately, but all of it together."[15]

One such thinker was the German polymath Oswald Spengler, author of *The Decline of the West* (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*). Spengler aspired to "solve, without straining or forcing, all those separate problems of religion, art-history, epistemology, ethics, politics, economics with which the modern intellect has so passionately – and so vainly – busied itself for decades." To do so, it was incumbent upon the thinker to win "his unconditional freedom of outlook," from which there is "no dependence, no priority, no relation of cause and effect, no differentiation of value or importance. . . . beyond all questions of good and evil." Upon achieving this perspective, one sees clearly that "The expansive tendency is a doom, something daemonic and immense, which grips, forces into service, and uses up the late

mankind." Spengler hoped that such a thinker would "be moved by this book to devote themselves to technics," and to politics.[16]

In her novel *To the Lighthouse* from 1927, Virginia Woolf approached the sensibility of the great thinker through the character of Mr. Ramsay. He is the *pater familias* who reflexively *sees past* what is right in front of him: namely, the people he ostensibly loves, in order to push his mind to new heights. "So without his distinguishing either his son or his wife, the sight of them fortified him and satisfied him and consecrated his effort to arrive at a perfectly clear understanding of the problem which now engaged the energies of his splendid mind." This mind, we learn, "had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q. . . . Still, if he could reach R it would be something."[17]

While straining to think his way to "R," Mr. Ramsay begins to see the world as Spengler did: "he saw, but now far far away . . . and somehow entirely defenceless against a doom which he perceived, his wife and son, together, in the window."[18]

We think that the singer needs to *know about love* in order to sing perfectly the jazz standard. In a 1947 essay by the Hungarian-born polymath, mathematician, atomic bomb developer, and later game theorist John von Neumann, titled "The Mathematician," an oft-cited passage reads:

> As a mathematical discipline travels far from its empirical source, or still more, if it is a second and third generation only indirectly inspired by ideas coming from "reality" . . . . there is a grave danger that the subject will develop along the line of least resistance, that the stream, so far from its source, will separate into a multitude of insignificant branches, and that the discipline will become a disorganized mass of details and complexities. In other words, at a great distance from its empirical source, or after much "abstract" inbreeding, a mathematical subject is in danger of degeneration.[19]

When this happens, von Neumann continued, the only thing for it is a "rejuvenating return to the source, the reinjection of more or less directly empirical ideas."[20] Fellow mathematician and friend Freeman Dyson concluded that von Neumann's "plunge into the empirical world of computer science" was "the rejuvenating return to the source" to which this passage refers.[21]

It's *logic itself* that Prima corrupts. In 1912, a Russian logician by the name of Nikolai Vasiliev published an article titled "Imaginary (Non-Aristotelian) Logic," in which he sought to codify an alternative system of logic, one analogous to the transformative non-Euclidian "new geometry" derived by Russian mathematician and geometer Nikolai Lobachevsky. Just as Lobachevsky's "imaginary geometry" had jettisoned Euclid's fifth postulate, the axiom of parallels, Vasiliev's "imaginary logic" did away with Aristotelian logic's law of contradiction, eliminating the notion that "*A* cannot be non-*A*."

Vasiliev noted that "the law of contradiction applies to the world of objects," but in the subjective realm of *truth* and *falsehood*, one could readily "violate or reject the law of contradiction" merely by consistent assertion:

> If I affirm, that this *NN* is at the same time both a human being and not-a-human-being, I do, of course, violate the law of contradiction, but if I always affirm it and firmly hold it, without contradicting myself, I am not at all violating the law of absolute difference between truth and falsehood at all. Therefore, imaginary logic . . . nowhere contradicts itself and is (thus) a system which is devoid of self-contradictions.[22]

In other words, within the framework of "imaginary logic," repeating the same thing consistently makes it truth. It is telling that the example Vasiliev offered of such a "truth" was that a human being could also be "not-a-human-being." In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* from 1951, political philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote that "To define consistency as truth as some modern logicians do means to deny the existence of truth."[23]

That sapling thing died. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, a "charismatic teacher" and "repairer of souls," was also a great teller of tales.[24] In one of them, "The Cripple," the title figure receives his father's last testament in the form of a riddle: "You must always try to water trees." Later, the son, who through grass-eating, grass-uprooting (magic), and cunning gains the ability to walk, visits a place with "thousands and tens of thousands of families of demons there." At one point, the demons tell the former cripple about their efforts to dig around the tree to prevent water from reaching it, because if the tree is watered, the demons are doomed. One demon king even tries to uproot the tree. The tale ends: "The demons suffered famine and weakness and sword and pestilence. Wars broke out among all the [demon] kings, and this brought about an earthquake. The whole earth fell in and the tree was completely watered. And no one remained of [the demons], as if they had never existed. Amen."[25]

"The Cripple" is generally acknowledged as "one of the most complicated" of Rabbi Nachman's tales. In a commentary on the work, we learn that "The son regains the power of mobility, then goes on to learn that the watering of trees is the crucial act which nourishes and preserves the source of sanctity without which the world disintegrates into a zoo of demons."[26]

The really big deal that is nothing at all. The word "perspective" comes from the Latin *perspicere*, which means "to see through." During the Renaissance, according to art historian Erwin Panofsky, perspective in art was seeing *as if through a window*.[27] Later, when it seemed a window could not encompass all that should be "seen through," thinkers invented devices: artificial tools or techniques for achieving a more expansive perspective. Sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, in his 1910 story "The Princess Steel," imagined a "megascope" through which one could see the "Great Near": the reality that is otherwise too all-encompassing to perceive

and therefore can only be detected by an immense and complicated technological contraption into which is fed a "chronicle of everyday facts," including data on "births, deaths, marriages, sickness, houses, schools, churches, organizations, the infirm, insane, blind, crimes, travel and migration, occupations, crops, things made and unmade."[28] These statistical data are processed and projected through the megascope to perceive a master pattern, "the Law of Life."[29] In the perspective offered by the megascope – as with the telescope and microscope – all that is human-scale vanishes. Or rather, one sees right through it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Holly Case is Professor of History at Brown University, where she is also a Deputy Director at the Data Science Institute. She is the author of *The Age of Questions: Or, A First Attempt at an Aggregate History of the Eastern, Social, Woman, American, Jewish, Polish, Bullion, Tuberculosis, and Many Other Questions over the Nineteenth Century, and Beyond* (2018) and *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during WWII* (2009). She has written on European history, literature, politics, and ideas for various magazines and newspapers, including *The Guardian, London Review of Books, The Chronicle Review, Aeon, The Nation, Dissent, The Times Literary Supplement, Eurozine,* and *Boston Review.*

ENDNOTES

[1] Rick Moody, "The Northern Wastes," *Dædalus* 155 (4) (Fall 2026): 72–86.

[2] George Morgan, *The Human Predicament: Dissolution and Wholeness* (Brown University Press, 1971), 172.

[3] Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five, or, The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*, 1st ed. (Delacorte, 1969).

[4] For various interpretations of this metaphor, see Meghan O'Gieblyn, *God Human Animal Machine: Technology, Metaphor, and the Search for Meaning* (Doubleday, 2021), 55.

[5] Robert Coover, "The End of Books," *The New York Times*, June 21, 1992, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/27/specials/coover-end.html; and Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992).

[6] Coover, "The End of Books."

[7] Bureau of Public Secrets, "Matsuo Bashô: Frog Haiku: (Thirty-Two Translations and One Commentary)," https://www.bopsecrets.org/gateway/passages/basho-frog.htm (accessed March 24, 2026), see translation and commentary by Robert Aitken. See also Robert Aitken, *A Zen Wave: Bashô's Haiku and Zen*, rev. ed. (Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003).

[8] On the "Manichean sciences," see Peter Galison, "The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1) (1994): 228–266, 231–232.

[9] Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense* (Chatto & Windus, 1952), 36–37, 52.

[10] Elek Benedek, *Édes anyaföldem! Egy nép s egy ember története*, II. kötet (A Pantheon Irodalmi Intézet Részvénytársaság Kiadása, 1920), 21.

[11] Dávid Zubreczki, "Sóhajok hídja Szegeden is van, de miért?" Index.hu, August 13, 2019, https://index.hu/kultur/2019/08/13/szeged_sohajok_hidja_mi_videkunk_ferenc_jozsef_lechner_odon.

[12] Dávid Zubreczki, "Ferenc József híres szegedi mondását az újságírók találták ki," Index.hu, August 22, 2019, https://index.hu/kultur/2019/08/22/ferenc_jozsef_hires_szegedi_mondasat_az_ujsagirok_talaltak_ki.

[13] W. H. Auden in "Warm Are the Still and Lucky Miles."

[14] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 36–42, 37.

[15] Béla Hamvas, "Modern Apokalipszis (A világkrizis irodalma)," *Társadalomtudomány* (15) (2–3) (1935): 113–127, 113.

[16] Oswald Spengler, "Introduction," in *The Decline of the West, Volume One: Form and Actuality*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (George Allen & Unwin, 1918), 39, 31, 37, 41, https://archive.org/details/declineofwest01spenuoft/page/n5/mode/2up. See also Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Volume Two: Perspectives of World History*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (George Allen & Unwin, 1922).

[17] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Hogarth Press, 1930), 56–57.

[18] Ibid.

[19] John von Neumann, "The Mathematician," in *Works of the Mind*, ed. Robert B. Heywood (University of Chicago Press, 1947), 180–196, 196.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Freeman Dyson, "A Walk through Johnny von Neumann's Garden," *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* 60 (02) (2013): 154–161, 159–160.

[22] N. A. Vasili'ev, "Imaginary (Non-Aristotelian) Logic," trans. and ed. Roger Vergauwen and Evgeny A. Zaytsev, *Logique et Analyse* 46 (182) (2003): 127–163, 128, 132, 137–138. Vasiliev distinguishes between the law of contradiction as having "objective value," and the subjective value of "*the law of absolute difference between truth and falsehood*."

[23] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1976), 477.

[24] Tsippi Kauffman, "Self-Image and the Father-Figure: Rabbi Nachman of Breslov on Repairing the Souls of the Dead," *Harvard Theological Review* 110 (4) (2017): 604–626, 604, 606.

[25] Nahman of Bratslav, "The Cripple," in *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*, trans. Arnold J. Band (Paulist Press, 1978), 83, 88, 90, 93.

[26] Ibid., 81.

[27] Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (Zone Books, 1997), 27. "We shall speak of a fully 'perspectival' view of space not when mere isolated objects, such as houses or furniture, are represented in 'foreshortening,' but rather only when the entire picture has been transformed–to cite another Renaissance theoretician–into a 'window,' and when we are meant to believe we are looking through this window into a space."

[28] W. E. B. Du Bois, Adrienne Brown, and Britt Rusert, "The Princess Steel," *PMLA* 130 (3) (2015): 819–829, 822–823, 819. The work of short fiction was unpublished in Du Bois's lifetime and was likely written between 1908 and 1910. Social and political theorist

Isaiah Berlin, writing on the thought of Leo Tolstoy and Joseph de Maistre, described a similar phenomenon: "We are immersed and submerged in a medium that, precisely to the degree to which we inevitably take it for granted as part of ourselves, we do not and cannot observe as if from the outside . . . inasmuch as it enters too intimately into all our experience, is itself too closely interwoven with all that we are and do to be lifted out of the flow." Isaiah Berlin, "The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History," in *The Proper Study of Mankind*: *An Anthology of Essays* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 436–498, 488.

[29] Du Bois, Brown, and Rusert, "The Princess Steel," 822–823.