

From *Agony: A Proposal*

Agony is a game; I am proposing that this game be put in place at the center of American life. I am proposing Agony, that is, as a potential American destiny. Its being taken out of context in this excerpt is not altogether regrettable; it is in the nature of proposals, I suspect, that their being taken out of context makes them seem more intriguing than they actually are.

The Country Doctors

The very first Lunatic is not referred to as The Lunatic. He is known, after his election and unto his death, as Daddy, if a man, and as Mommy, if a woman. He is elected by popular vote. Five candidates run. Every Child, Tenant, and Landlord is allowed to vote.

The five Daddy/Mommy-candidates are chosen randomly from a pool. This pool is made up of all persons who meet the following criteria: a) between 30 and 50 years old; b) born on a Day Of Prayer; c) never married; d) one or both parents drowned or committed suicide; e) possesses a Doctorate from an accredited University in one or more of the following disciplines: Philosophy, History, Semiotics, Archaeology, Geology, Physics; f) male or female (not both or neither).

Once the five Daddy/Mommy-candidates have been randomly selected, they are interviewed, one after the other, for one hour, by the same interviewer (with the same questions), on live television. They do not meet one another before or during the election process and do not see one another's interviews on television. During the interview, each candidate stands naked and alone in a small room (10' by 10'), and questions are put to him through a speaker in the ceiling. If the candidate is deaf, he is

given the questions in advance and answers them from memory. If the candidate is mute, he must use his body to answer the questions. When the interview is completed, the candidate is sequestered until the election, which is three months later. During these three months, there is no media coverage of the upcoming election, save to say when the election is to take place and wherein one might vote if one was to choose to go about voting. Discussion of the candidates does not take place in the media; it takes place only among the people in their daily lives. Anyone found using media to disseminate his views regarding candidates will be arrested and, if convicted, will be considered a Meddler. Meddlers are imprisoned for life.

The first interview is at noon, the second at 2:00 p.m., the third at 4:00 p.m., the fourth at 7:00 p.m., and the fifth and final interview begins at 9:00 p.m. This day of interviewing Daddy/Mommy-candidates is known as *The Capitulation*.

During *The Capitulation*, the interviewer's questions are as follows:

- a) explain the circumstances surrounding your birth;
- b) explain your experience of childhood;
- c) why have you never married?
- d) how has your parent's or parents' drowning and/or suicide affected you?
- e) if you had your choice, how would you live – that is, draw for us a picture of where you would live and how you would pass your days and nights?
- f) why did you choose to pursue your particular Doctorate or Doctorates?
- g) what do you imagine The Lunatic's role is?
- h) what do you imagine Agony is for?
- i) do you have any pets – if so, please provide names and descriptions;

j) how do you feel about being called Daddy (or Mommy, if female)?

The Daddy/Mommy-candidates are not forced to reply to the questions. If the question is asked and there is one minute of silence (or no demonstrated intention to reply sensibly), the interviewer moves on to the next question. The candidate may choose to answer none of the questions that are put to him; this is a perfectly viable strategy on his part. Voters in this case will have to judge him by his body, which he cannot help but put into evidence, and by the manner of his silences and/or incoherences. The candidate may behave however he likes during the interview; he may answer seriously or sarcastically, and/or he may remain silent, scream, put out his eyes, masturbate—his campaign is utterly his own. Also, interviewer's etiquette demands that the next question be postponed until the candidate has finished his reply to the question at hand. It is conceivable that a candidate talk for the whole hour in reply to the first question. If, on the other hand, the candidate says little or nothing in his replies, all of the questions might be asked before the hour is up; in this case, there are simply no more questions asked and the camera remains fixed upon the candidate, who, again, is free to do as he pleases in the questionlessness that he finds himself treated with.

When it becomes apparent who Daddy or Mommy is, the failed candidates are exiled to Laughter, where they will proceed to live out their days as *The Original Smut Peddlers*. The Original Smut Peddlers are distinguished from subsequent Smut Peddlers in that they are not ever involved in a yearly Smut Peddler film. They are, however, once each year gathered together in a room and televised for one hour. This hour is known as *The Original Smut Peddler Hour* and it is broadcast at eight p.m. on the forty-fifth day after the autumn Agony. During this hour, the Original Smut Peddlers respond to one question: *how have you been?* How or if they choose to answer is, again, entirely up to each individual. When all four Original Smut Peddlers have died, *The Original Smut Peddler Hour* becomes *The Smut Peddler Death Hour*, which airs the same time *The Original Smut Peddler*

Hour aired. In this hour, Smut Peddlers discuss the most recent Smut Peddler death, or the life of said Smut Peddler.

Daddy or Mommy is taken into The Womb, which is to be his residence so long as he remains in his position. He is well-fed and well provided for. His rooms are plush but simple. When he dies, he will be buried beneath the field of play. As the first Lunatic (though one does not ever call Daddy or Mommy a Lunatic), he has the same duties and privileges as every Lunatic to come.

Daddy or Mommy is not tattooed. All subsequent Lunatics, however, as well as all Torso-Painters, Gluttons, Little Fuadies, and Yahwehs (even the first), are tattooed, upon their hiring, and their tattoos identify their position. The tattoos are given by a Game Official known as *Lord Of Word-Bits*. The first Lord Of Word-Bits is a randomly chosen tattoo artist (chosen by Game Officials), and he serves for the first year of Agony. During this first year, a convention of American tattoo artists is held, and at this convention a new Lord Of Word-Bits is elected and takes over the position. He serves for five years, at which time another convention/election is held. The incumbent Lord Of Word-Bits is free to compete again at the convention and to be elected again.

The tattoos given are illustrated below. A Lord Of Word-Bits must adhere to the general idea/pattern of the illustrations given below, but is free to accomplish them in his own style. (Illustrations are missing.)

Every Lunatic is, first and foremost, the groundskeeper of The Frontier. He is the highest-ranking of the game's Country Doctors. He has the power, so long as he lives and is not retired, to hire (from a limited pool established by criteria discussed below) and to excommunicate the Country Doctors who work beneath him: the Torso-Painter, the Glutton, Little Fuadie, and Yahweh. Lastly, he is responsible to submit and maintain a list of five spectators (listed in order of preference, and again, chosen from

a limited pool to be discussed below) from which his replacement, the new Lunatic, will be chosen.

The Glutton is Agony's medical care-giver. Appointed by The Lunatic, he resides within The Doctor's Office so long as he remains in his position. He is well-fed and well provided for. His rooms are plush but simple. If he is retired, he is delivered over into Laughter. If he dies while he is still in his position at The Frontier, the Torso-Painter buries him beneath the field of play. So long as he remains in his position, he tends to the health of The Lunatic, the Torso-Painter, Yahweh, the Pioneer Families within The Covered Wagons, and The Smut Peddlers not yet in Laughter (The Smut Peddlers still alive when Agony has subsided). He does not care for Little Fuadie; Little Fuadie lives without medical care. The Glutton tends, prior to every spring Agony, to The Sleeper (The Sleeper is a tiger involved in the spring Agony), and it is his duty to bury deceased Sleepers, Lunatics, Torso-Painters, and Yahwehs who die in his care. He also helps in the retrieval of both The Counted Up Tears and the mirror-shards after the winter Agony.

The Torso-Painter paints Being and the torsos of Pioneer Families about to descend from The Covered Wagons. He lives within The Grave. He also cooks, every day, lunch and dinner for the Glutton, The Lunatic, and the three Pioneer Families. Breakfast is "continental," cookies and bagels and such, and is pre-stocked in the Berths of The Families. The Torso-Painter is well-fed and well provided for. His rooms are plush but simple. If he dies while he is still in his position, he is buried beneath the field of play by The Glutton. He himself buries The Gluttons who die while he is at his position, and he helps in the removal of The Counted-Up Tears and the mirror-shards after the winter Agony.

Little Fuadie pilots Despair, which is a large military-style helicopter (stripped of its weaponry), and drives Conception, which is a large van. He drops the winter Agony's mirrors and brings, in spring, the Sleeper (when The Sleeper need be replenished). He has television most of the time and he is well-fed and well

provided for. His rooms, unlike the rooms of the other Country Doctors, are not located at The Frontier. They are located at *The Hunger Hut*, which is a palatial estate located ten miles north of The Frontier. Little Fuadie has access to whatever entertainment technologies he desires—this means gaming systems (reality simulators), large-screen televisions, camera equipment, computers, stereo systems, recording systems, musical instruments, art supplies—whatever he deems necessary for the maintenance of his being-entertained, save devices which might be used as weapons against Pioneer Families, those in Agony, spectators, or Country Doctors. He could not, for instance, possess a nuclear warhead for his own entertainment. Ultimately, decisions about what is considered weaponry are made by The Lunatic. Little Fuadie lives in The Hunger Hut from the day of his appointment to the day he dies, when he is cremated by his replacement. His ashes are dropped over The Frontier by the subsequent Little Fuadie on the first day of preparation for the winter Agony (or, if his death occurs during preparation for the winter Agony, on the next day a mirror is scheduled to be dropped). Little Fuadie, unlike the other Country Doctors, is not allowed to retire from his position—he must continue to work at his position until his death.

Little Fuadie is also a tender of *The Doubts*, which are the three five- to nine-year-old female tigers that might become Sleepers. On the premises of The Hunger Hut, there are large, luxurious, climate-controlled pens for each of the three Doubts. Little Fuadie feeds the Doubts, and feeds them well. When a Sleeper has died, he chooses the next Sleeper from the three Doubts he always possesses, and he delivers her to the field of play at the appropriate time. When a Doubt becomes too old—that is, when she turns ten—she is put on display in a special exhibit, *Doubts Gone By*, at the National Zoo, and a new Doubt is delivered to The Hunger Hut. When a Doubt dies, she is treated as if she was Little Fuadie himself—that is, she is cremated and her ashes are scattered over The Frontier on the first appropriate day.

Doubts permeate The Hunger Hut with their gait, a gait of undeserved luxury.

Little Fuadie is confined to The Hunger Hut at all times, save when he is summoned to drive Conception or to pilot Despair. During Agony, The Hunger Hut is deprived of all electrical power. When Agony is done, power is restored and Little Fuadie may begin again to watch television or to pursue whatever electricity-driven entertainments he chooses.

Every home is provided with 4'x6' photographs of all five of The Country Doctors and must, by law, display these photographs on a prominent wall of the house. Every year, Country Doctor photographs are retaken and provided again to all spectators. Spectators may use their own discretion in deciding which Country Doctor photograph to display; that is, their only responsibility is to display The Country Doctors currently in power. Entering into the home of a new neighbor, one automatically scrutinizes the decisions he has made about which Country Doctor photographs to display—The Glutton as a younger man or The Glutton after twelve years of service? And how often will he be inclined to change the display? The Country Doctor photographs we display say a lot about who we are.

As The Covered Wagons approach Agony, Country Doctors at The Frontier have access to: a comfortable bed with fresh linens, washer and dryer, hot and cold running water (sink and shower), toilet, a computer (word-processing enabled, with access to all State library texts (which he may choose to have read to him), and with limited email capabilities—i.e., with the ability to send to and to receive from a few specific addresses), a compact disc player, a refrigerator, a store of art-making materials, a store of snack foods (a large store of snack foods, decided upon by the Torso-Painter, is delivered to The Frontier by Little Fuadie on the fifth day of preparation for the winter Agony, and these are portioned out by The Lunatic at that time and must last the whole year), a store of continental breakfast foods (a large store of cookies and bagels and such, decided upon by The Torso-

Painter, is delivered to The Frontier by Little Fuadie on the sixth day of preparation for the winter Agony, and these are portioned out at that time by The Lunatic and must last the whole year), and two meals (lunch and dinner, decided upon and prepared by the Torso-Painter).

The Lunatic is confined to The Womb every day from midnite until six a.m., except during Agony, at which time he is confined, with The Torso-Painter and The Glutton, in The Heart Of All That Is Not Contagious. When not confined, The Lunatic has access to every part of The Frontier, save the stands, the residences of the Pioneer Families, The Doctor's Office, The Grave, and The Heart Of All That Is Not Contagious.

The Torso-Painter is confined every day in The Grave from midnite until 7 a.m., except during Agony, at which time he is confined, with The Lunatic and The Glutton, in The Heart Of All That Is Not Contagious. When not confined, the Torso-Painter has access to every part of The Frontier, save the stands, the residences of the Pioneer Families, The Womb, The Doctor's Office, and The Heart Of All That Is Not Contagious.

The Glutton is confined every day in The Doctor's Office from midnite until 8 a.m., except during Agony, at which time he is confined, with The Lunatic and The Torso-Painter, in The Heart Of All That Is Not Contagious. When not confined, the Glutton has access to every part of The Frontier, save the stands, the residences of the Pioneer Families, The Womb, The Grave, and The Heart Of All That Is Not Contagious.

At any time The Lunatic may excommunicate or force into retirement any or all of The Country Doctors beneath him. He must, however, provide an explanation for his decisions to excommunicate or to force the retirement of The Country Doctor(s) in question. It is a given that the public will not abide an unfair Lunatic or a Lunatic who does not have at heart the best interests of Agony and all that precedes it.

When a Country Doctor is removed from his position, it is usually via his being forced into retirement. Retirement means his entering into Laughter and dwelling among Smut Peddlers, True Dreamers, and retired Country Doctors. Excommunication is a rarer fate; to be excommunicated, a Country Doctor must have perpetrated a decidedly heinous act, an act blatantly disrespectful toward the Agony he has been hired to care for.

Excommunication means that The Country Doctor is removed from The Frontier immediately; he is taken to The Edge Of The Frontier, where he will live out the rest of his days in a jail cell. There, he is well-fed and receives medical attention when he needs it (though he has no access to recreational drugs of any kind). His deprivation lies in his extremely limited access to diversion. He is allowed no books—nothing at all which might be read and nothing with which to write—no music, and no human company (his food is delivered and his medical care given by Game Officials who are not allowed to speak with him). He is provided with just one diversion: his television plays, continually and in order, the episodes of The Andy Griffith Show. When the last show finishes, the first begins again—a continuous loop—and the excommunicated Country Doctor watches again as Opie grows up, Andy searches for a proper wife, Aunt Bee persists in her obtuse pursuit of absolute stasis, and etc. . . . He is restricted to dwelling, that is, in a world without Agony.

A poll is conducted every day, save Days Of Prayer and the six days preceding Days Of Prayer. The poll is carried out by Game Officials, who call 50,000 random spectators and ask:

*do you approve of the current Lunatic?

*do you approve of the current Torso-Painter?

*do you approve of the current Glutton?

Those polled must answer yes or no—an answer other than yes or no is taken as a yes. If the approval rating for The Lunatic falls below 25%, he is impeached. Impeachment means his immediate removal from power. The impeached Lunatic is treated like an Extinct Animal, though he is not afforded an opportunity to

graduate from the Dream School he attends, and so, can never become a True Dreamer.

Yahweh and Little Fuadie, it will be noticed, are not subject to public (dis)approval. Yahweh's excommunication or forced retirement is always the personal decision of The Lunatic. Yahweh is never meaningfully exposed to the public, and he works very closely with The Lunatic – these facts, coupled together, make a public judgment of him unnecessary. Little Fuadie, like Yahweh, is never meaningfully exposed to the public, though his performance of tasks – quite public – does create some sense of who he might be. Add to this the fact that he does not have retirement as an option, and the fact that he lives apart from the other Country Doctors and works quite separately from them, and you begin to grasp why a public judgment of him is unnecessary. If he falters in the performance of his duties, it will be obvious, and The Lunatic will excommunicate him if a new Little Fuadie is necessary.

The Torso-Painter is selected by The Lunatic from a pool of candidates who meet the following criteria: a) between 25 and 50 years old; b) born on Portrait Day; c) divorced at least once and divorced at present; d) has won a National Art Award (Awards are given twice yearly in these categories: Painting, Drawing, Sculpture, and Word-Use); f) male or female (not both or neither).

The Glutton is selected by The Lunatic from a pool of candidates who meet the following criteria: a) between 25 and 50 years old; b) born on Portrait Day; c) married for at least two years; d) worked for at least two years as a Medical doctor with a family practice; e) male or female (not both or neither).

Little Fuadie is selected by The Lunatic from a pool of candidates who meet the following criteria: a) between 25 and 50 years old; b) born as a twin; c) his twin is now deceased; d) licensed to fly a helicopter and a plane of one kind or another.

Yahweh is selected by The Lunatic from a pool of candidates who meet the following criteria: a) between 30 and 50 years old; b) born on A Day Of Prayer; c) never married; d) one or both parents drowned or committed suicide; e) possesses a Doctorate from an accredited University in one or more of the following disciplines: Philosophy, History, Semiotics, Archaeology, Geology, Physics; f) male or female (not both or neither).

If ever a pool of candidates for any of the Country Doctor positions is empty, The Lunatic is empowered to choose any spectator he believes is fit for the job.

A Lunatic has good reason to dread impeachment, and will naturally do all he can to avoid it. This means treating the other Country Doctors fairly and tending passionately to Agony and all that precedes it.

Spectators understand that the decision to disapprove of a current Lunatic is a grave act, and one that should never be taken lightly. The Lunatic should be given the benefit of the doubt as often as is possible, and impeachment should be an exceedingly rare event, a last-ditch protective measure. It is a terrible thing, after all, to live in a society that knowingly sends a Lunatic to attend Dream School, where it is not possible for him to thrive.

The Lunatic is never told of his exact approval rating. So long as his approval rating remains at 25% or higher, no mention is made of it. The public is never told either, unless an impeachment is achieved. The Lunatic and the public are told, however, of the approval ratings of the other Country Doctors. It is expected that The Lunatic will take action when a Country Doctor's approval rating sinks near to or below 25%, but he is never bound to act. The decision to excommunicate or force the retirement of a Country Doctor—even a Country Doctor whose approval rating is very low—remains in the hands of The Lunatic and The Lunatic alone. He may even choose, at his own peril perhaps, to remove a Country Doctor whose approval rating is very high.

When A Lunatic is impeached, retires, or dies, a new Lunatic is appointed immediately. The old Lunatic will have compiled and maintained a list of five potential replacements, and The Torso-Painter will choose one of these five.

The Lunatic is restricted in compiling his list of replacements; he must choose from a pool of applicants composed of persons who meet the following criteria: a) between 20 and 55 years old; b) born on a Day Of Prayer; c) one or both parents drowned or committed suicide; d) possesses a Doctorate from an accredited University in one or more of the following disciplines: Philosophy, History, Semiotics, Archaeology, Geology, Physics; e) male or female (not both or neither). If one of his replacement candidates becomes, in the course of time, ineligible, he is notified of this fact and must choose a new candidate.

Terms Used In Academic Discourse Touching On Agony

sumptuous: 1. a Family experiencing dominance of other Families; 2. the Family most likely to bring Being into Saying.

conjecture: 1. a Family whose blindness and/or deafness has made their sumptuousness seem almost unthinkable; 2. a Family whose weakness—disorientation and injury—has brought them to the verge of Failure.

good christians: 1. a Family that is not sumptuous and not conjecture; 2. a Family devoted to the struggle against the prevailing sumptuousness, fearful of falling away into conjecture, but not yet disgusted with the stasis that their fearful devotion has produced.

disgust: 1. the process by which good christians are eroded and replaced by sumptuousness or conjecture; 2. erosion of the fear of becoming conjecture caused by coming nearer to sumptuousness; 3. erosion of the fear of becoming conjecture caused by coming nearer to conjecture; 4. a reinvigoration of playfulness

produced when a prolonged stasis discovers its own nonsensical presumption of eternal play.

glee: 1. the state a Family enters into when their sumptuousness becomes conspicuously intense, and when it becomes apparent that Being will likely be contained in their Saying; 2. that which most often leads to Smut Peddling, but which can at times be wrenched away from the Family in possession of it (in this case Agony itself becomes gleeful, and all Families, no matter how sumptuous or conjectured they may be or become, are considered to partake of it until the Agony is ended).

heady days: 1. the first five or ten minutes of play; 2. the first phase of play, wherein those who have entered into Agony are understandably vulnerable to panic, and so, struggle to become part of Family life by orienting themselves with the tasks they face and the dangers these tasks produce; 3. this initial phase is felt to be over when the anxieties of those in Agony have subsided somewhat, and when a newfound orientation leads to the sense of a direction in Family life; 4. unstrategic hunger, hunger not yet productive of a direction in Family life, which is not evidenced, necessarily, by the movement of Being, but is more readily apparent in the establishment of the character of the Families, which is to say, by the strategies arising from their opposition to one another.

the roustabout: 1. the phase of play that begins when heady days ends; 2. the phase of play beginning when the initial anxieties of those in Agony have been transcended (for the most part), and a sense of how the three Families are bound to play has been developed; 3. the phase of play beginning when spectators sense that there is one game, the trajectory of which can at least be guessed at; 4. the phase of play characterized by a new naïve assumption of the discrete utility in whatever a given player happens to be doing; 5. the phase of play prior to one Family's becoming decidedly sumptuous; 6. the phase of play prior to the creation of a new ecstasy (for the sumptuous Family) and a new desperation (for their opponents) that, together, call out for

something more powerful than discretion, more subtle than utility; 7. the phase of play that ends when players first understand the true brevity of Being's being apart from Saying.

breaking the water: 1. the act of moving Being, for the first time, out of the tubby.

the labor: 1. the phase of play beginning when the roustabout ends (it is often associated with the breaking of the water, but need not entail it); 2. the phase of play beginning with the introduction of an ecstasy/desperation associated with the sumptuousness of one Family, and a new understanding of the (not necessarily specific) fate of Being, which this sumptuousness makes apparent; 3. the labor re-captures the initial panicky disorientation of heady days, even in the dominant Family (who now sense their sumptuousness clearly enough to fear its demise) but then channels it into the discretion and utility that, on the one hand, have led to the possibility of Failure (and so, death), and on the other hand, have led to the possibility for entering into Laughter; 4. this panicky disorientation most often re-energizes effort in the sumptuous Family, for whom discretion and utility have seemed to work, but for the other Families (whether good christians or conjecture), something more drastic is called for—a fundamental change in approach, particularly regarding their alliance with the other near-to-Failure Family; 5. the labor is a particularly dangerous phase of play because changes in approach (and alliance), when birthed out of panic, can make the situation even worse; 6. the labor continues so long as no family increases its sumptuousness to the point of glee (note that a labor may be composed of many shifts in sumptuousness, so long as no one sumptuousness rises to the point of glee).

a long labor: 1. a labor in which the non-sumptuous Families' fundamental changes in approach (and alliance) accrue gradually and prevent sumptuousness from growing too quickly, even as that initial sumptuousness is never unseated, and does eventually become glee.

a complicated labor: 1. a labor in which the initial sumptuousness is unseated at least once.

pre-history: 1. the phase of play beginning with the first glee; 2. in most cases, pre-history is the first glee's strict deepening, Being's increasingly intense nearness to Saying; 3. in rare cases, pre-history is complicated by a loss of the first glee—the highly unlikely reversal of a supremely prevailing sumptuousness—and when this occurs, the glee is shared out to all Families until the game is over; when this occurs, spectators say that the game has entered deep into pre-history; 4. pre-history ends when Being enters into Saying.