

3/17/01 Saturday's Rock, Aesklepios, the Folly Master
Closing time: 11:06 C.S.T.

Knowledge through suffering.

Aeschylus
Agamemnon

The son, you see, takes his daddy's disease quite hard.
First he tried the Word Cure. Gently he wheedled
And pleaded with the old man to put away his cloak and stay home.
Didn't work. So next, the Water Cure.
Dunked him and doused him. No dice. Then he applied Religion.
Made him a Korybant. Tambourine and all, his daddy
Banged his way into court for more drumhead justice.
Finally, as a last recourse, he turned to Pure Prayer.
One night he grabbed the old man, sailed over to Epidaurus,
And bedded him down for the cure in Aeskepios' Temple . . .
And up he popped at dawn in the Jury box . . .
In short, he's insane; the more we reason with him,
The more he judges everybody else. Absolutely hopeless,
Incurable . . .

Aristophanes
The Wasps

Do you not know, Prometheus, that there are words that are physicians for the
sickness of wrath?

Aeschylus,
Prometheus Bound

Lab Results

'Der Schreibtisch ist ordentlich, Ja, aber der Kopftsraum ist nicht ordentlich. Es ist schmutzig.' Herr Doktor Blasius Erhardt sat in his *Laborbüro*, not quite alone. He had taken a couple of *Übermausen* from their cages in this inner sanctum, and was watching them cavort on the desktop. As they sniffed around the orderly array of pens, pencils, paper clips, staplers, Herr Doctor Erhardt sought what he always sought now, and what these living displays of his laboratory subjects had so often almost afforded him: peace. The mice were obliging as always, innocent, curious, clean. The soothing sandalwood perfume of office incense, the selected romantic numbers from his favorite operas and Lieder, the soft, caressing lighting were all functioning as they had been designed to function. But the sanctuary of peace was anything but. Herr Doktor Erhardt's *Friedenzimmer* was mutating into a sanctuary of another kind, a sanctuary where the primordial divinity of chaos could reassert itself and destroy the temporal, merely human order that he had tried to impose upon everything. His thoughts crowded in upon him like terrified living beings, like the rodents in the *Überlag Projekt* in the outerroom

ripping each other to pieces in their struggle for *Lebensraum*. His roles of *Hauptsturmführer*, *Ehemann*, *Artz*, *Wissenschaftler*, *Vater*, which had always seemed to comprise the essence of his existence, were now felt as the weight of an enormous costume and mask, a giant edifice of creaking wires and wadding unraveling from the inside as the life processes of respiration and perspiration wore against it. The *Labor*, the entire *Gesundungsdkhaus*, seemed to take on the characteristics of a crumbling ruin, the concentric sink of an ancient theater where the audience, which had always been held at bay beyond the proscenium, now became the vengeful personae of the drama. That small, wounded animal inside him, along with the mice in the cages, the mice on his desktop, the mice in the walls, had become the audience, or rather, his torturers. For it seemed to him, that he was the subject of some kind of malevolent experiment, where the forces of history, perhaps of the cosmos itself, tormented him relentlessly, merely to gratify some monstrous aberration of curiosity, merely to test the limits of his endurance, to add weight to the mask, to crush him, to break him down. Tired, he lay the shriveled raisin of his head on the desktop, allowing the freed mice to fiddled harmlessly with those few white strands of hair which still clung incongruously to his aged skull. He was no longer in search of power, or knowledge, or even health. It was sleep that he sought, although sleep these days afforded him no respite, his dreams adding to his torment with shriekingly realistic fervor. It would be far better, he thought, if he could simply die. Yet this fear, vivid with instinctive insistence, kept gnawing and gnawing at him with words a little too eloquent to be entirely his own. Perhaps the mice were whispering in his ears. “Death can offer you no release. The promised blank space where neither sensation nor thought can intrude, is no such thing. It is Death itself, immortal and unrelenting, busier and much more sentient than Life, which goads you — both now and for forever — with its tireless, fiery brand.”

Herr Doktor Blasius Erhardt had lived in America now almost as long as he had lived in Deutschland. He had read American newspapers, shopped in American malls, watched American television, and, when he was compelled to, chitchatted with American neighbors. The country, like an accumulated ignorance, had insinuated itself into whatever nooks and creases of brain tissue had been vacated by his willful destruction of war memories — misinformation and ignorance replacing propaganda and National Socialist ideology, advertising jingles, like an invading army, sweeping in to displace political slogans. Before and between the two wars, he had been an expert in all things Grecian. He had crawled over Athens and Attica with the best scholars of the nascent century — with Wunsch, Abt, Moller — all victims of the so-called Great War. He had even met Dieterich once, the great man himself, and was no stranger to the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, the Demotic spells that undercut the whole mythology of a rational Apollonian classicism. But now his memory was ravaged by too many intervening catastrophes, and he prayed for a phylactery in the garbled tongue of the superstitious. “Great God in Heaven revolving the world, the true god, IAO! Lord, ruler of all, ABLANATHANALBA, grant me, Oh! grant me this favor, let me have the name of the great god in this phylactery, and protect, protect me from every evil thing, me, whom Ella-Luise Erhardt bore, whom Torsten Erdhardt begot.” The words erupted into his mouth and forced themselves to be spoken — their strange manifestation, like the uncontrollable outbursts of Tourette syndrome victims, causing him to vomit forth

ancient spells, and bind them afterwards to antique, but still living stories. What would Diototos, in his new persona as master, do, when he hit the road to tour the Theopompus estates? Would he find a great country house surrounded by vineyards, ryefields, pasturage for sleek livestock? Would his eyes gladden at the sight of orderly slave quarters, Sythians like darkies singing rustic hymns of contentment? Would he gaze down Cypress-lined avenues sighting the great marble columns of the manor? Hardly. These things, Herr Doktor Erhardt knew, were nothing but cheap *amerikanische* fantasies. Athenian lands were not ancestral, not grandiose plantations, nor elegant *estacia* surrounded by the supplicating acreage of a subdued and civilized landscape. There were no manor houses. No, not so much as one. But mean hovels there were aplenty, stuck in the midst of little unconnected patchwork lands that had been traded from one absent gentry to another, squandered on dice rolls, swapped for sheep, slaves or crockery, received and lost in unwanted daughters' dowries. Diototos and his mock-slave, Melitus, stumbled from one slovenly lean-to to another, sleeping with slaves, overseers, asses, oxen, hens, bedding on pee-soaked straw meaner than any they had ever nested in in Athens. Wild thistles cut their ankles, their feet blistered from toiling over rocky ground, their eyes-peeled constantly for marauders. Burnt ruins of fields and huts, from the Greeks' interminable internecine bloodlettings, cluttered the pastoral squalor of the Athenians' degraded country landholdings, and respect from the farmhands had they none. When they found taverns — no more elegant in their accommodations than pigsties — they stopped. They choked down grub consisting of the basest *sitos*, while Diototos tried to remember that he was now supposed to be a gentleman. But more than once he caught the suspicious eye of a tavernwench scorching him as he reached into communal dishes with his taboo, unclean hand. Of course, they drank. Theirs was not some sweetly aged and fat ambrosia, crowned with white flowers, and pubescent with the perfumes of wave-girdled Lesbos, but uncut *trikotylos*, which was but a dubious bargain even at three half-pints an obol. Diototos raised a crude earthenware flagon brimming with black-clotted bilge. Then bleary-eyed and hung-over from his continuous bingeing, he toasted his conspirator with his one fraying jest: "It is a good wine, Melitus. Not a great wine, but a good wine." But for Melitus the journey had long since ceased to be a joking matter, and he didn't mind snorting out his increasing contempt with no attempt at subterfuge. "If you say so, my Lord." "Yes, slave, I do say so, and you will say so too or pay the price for your obstinacy." With the barkeep eyeing them, Melitus would tiredly answer: "A good wine, My *Lord*, not a great one," but the tilt of his head and his eyerolls spoke of rebellion. These kinds of exchanges were becoming more galling for both of them, and also more frequent. Though now ensconced in his role as Theopompus, citizen and landowner, Diototos was not receiving nearly as much butt-kissing as he had imagined as his due —and he was beginning to resent Melitus's licence. Plots were fermenting on both sides that were even more foul than the cheap wine that they guzzled. And it was oh too disgustingly apparent to both of them, that the meandering course that their feet were plodding through the hodge-podge of exploited Attica was leading where neither of them had originally planned to go. The faux-Theopompus emptied his grog in one gulp, and brought the crock down on the table with a ferocious pulverizing blow, the shards splintering like dangerous shrapnel through the closequartered tavern. He groaned, punished his hair with the dirty claw of his hand, and stomped out of the dark hovel and into the sharp, hot light of a dying Attican day. Melitus apologized to the

barkeep and promised to retrieve payment and reparations from his indisposed master. But the slave remained, alone, slurping his own swill, and brooding. Finally, he lay the great stone of his head down on the table, with a not so subtle clunk. At that signal, a small voice, not so tired, sounded from the stage erected inside his head, the message magaphoned so that even those braincells at the back of the theater might hear and understand.

Melitus: Slave to a slave. It is the oppression of black bile that weighs upon my heart, watching his besotted face glower red with choler, his snails' eyebrows arching sweaty and discontented above suspicious bloodshot eyes. Pah! The money that he has stolen will be spent in escaping into drunkenness and not in escaping to freedom. He is bound already, and I must devise a way to bind him further.

Herr Doktor Erhardt looked at the speaker and marveled that his orderly *Shriebtish* had become entirely *vershiedene*, a space that shifted like the mood of an intent reader following the sentences of an insane novelist. The country tavern was dark, cloistered meanly with body odor, tooth-decay, crusted vomit, urine and stale, bad wine. The speaker's face shone in the dark with roadgrime, eyes wide and yellow, radiating a thirst for vengeance. He had seen this face before. Where was it? In Poland? Cutting the beard off a Jew for a little sport before marching him out into the woods for elimination. A little medical instruction for Battalion 101. "*Also* it is best to leave the bayonet on the rifle. Lay the point on the back of the neck, so. This steadies the hand while you fire, which will become quite tired, as you will discover, by the end of a lengthy operation. **BLAM!** Of course, there is bound to be a bit of *schmutz* from the discharge (wiping brain, blood and bone from his hand and uniform sleeve with the towel provided for the purpose by his orderly). Distasteful, ja, but it will wash off, and you will become accustomed to this as one of the conditions of your work. Like a doctor in the operating theater, Ja?, Something to be endured to save the life of the patient. But it is your operations which will save the life of the Reich." Were those the eyes? What did their bile portend?

Melitus: To Lethe he goes each day, and in Lethe he shall stay. For I shall rob him when he is sunk in his stupor both of money and of title and make a plot-to-plot sweep of the Master's lands for valuables. Then I shall away to Sicily, to freedom, and perhaps a nice little import or lending business.

'Just like a Jew,' thought Herr Doktor Erhardt, 'a parasite with money, too lazy to farm.' The thought was almost automatic, contemptuous, but laden too with something that was becoming altogether too frequent of late with scenes of *Mutti* and *Vati* in a dark place. There were commingled male and female cries. There was a feeling of floating or falling in his stomach. Then the figure of *Vati* coming out of the dark, half-naked, angry and vengeful. *Kleiner* Blasie cowers in the corner. "*Stopp!*"

Diodotos had staggered into the brambles that sprouted just beyond the tavern's one crude doorway, spun and fell, gazing up into a golding sky that would soon enough sprout stars. One or two hard breaths bludgeoned him quickly into a heaving snooze. So

far so good. Time for Time to do its work. But after, when a curious fieldmouse, unmolested, tugs at and unravels the frayed sleeve of his once elegant Chiton, the imposter awakens from his blubbering slumber, and speaks.

Diodotos/Theopompus: This slave galls me with tarnished looks and tardy obedience. The overseers troll these haunts constantly for silver mine Myrmidons, and Melitus will soon find his recompense in those infernal regions, and I shall be richer by the price of his forfeit body.

Herr Doktor Erhardt saw that the tavern and its weedy yard had only been a set, and not one constructed by carpenters and stage designers, but woven of words. A hard *Etesian* wind was whipping the hot afternoon towards a dustchoked nightfall. He stood at the center of a circular outdoor amphitheater, rows of ruined stone seats cut into a sparsely foliated mountainside, the seats filled with *Häftlinge*, the life unfit for life. They were all there — the whole motley assortment of *Untermenschen* — the capo clowns, die Müßelmänner, deathly gaunt in prison stripes, the Gypsy waifs, the Polish professors, the Russian refuse, all the abused slaves and women of Athens, and, of course, the ubiquitous, unclean Jews. They had arrived — these everlasting dead — still bearing the wounds that expunged them from earthly existence, skulls shattered by grace shots, necks tattooed with purple noosetracks, eyes bloodshot and tongues blue from Zyklon-B gas. All manner of animals milled about the assemblage: dogs, mice, goats, sheep, pigs, cats, cattle, chickens — the footpaths, too, alive with serpents, the air crowded with crisscrossing songbirds and scored with the heavy black lines of circling crows. This was his audience, and he was their performer. Melitus and Diodotos stood near him on stage, but when they removed their masks, their skulls were crystal stones, their featureless faces polished to mirrored smoothness. He touched them and they shrieked mouthlessly, crumbling into rosy windswept dust. The audience was staring at him in enraged expectation. Then they all began stamping their feet, until their protest reached a pulsating, thunderous crescendo. Something was expected of him, he knew, something perhaps as fearful, as unthinkable, as just standing here before them, and doing, saying, nothing. Somewhere, far away, a love duet was soaring plaintively, *Tristan und Isolde* singing of their *Nacht der Liebe*. A mouse, perhaps twin mice, tickled, with divergent messages, the hairy portals of his two waking ears.

Life In the Compress

It is true, one forgets, in the midst of that
Terrifying activity known as
Routine, in the throes of one's responsibilities,
That the communal laboratory
Is only the space between waking and sleeping,
The dust between dream and dream.

We must remember how each of us is trapped,
That the weight we know as Time keeps pressing us,
And is always crushing the body into its role.

The personality is a lump of mud,
Which burns with life's compacted bursts of stars.