

# FAREWELL TO ARMS

His golden locks Time hath to silver turn'd;  
O Time too swift, O swiftness never ceasing!

George Peele (1590)

Before you get a chance to look around the picnic is over.

Hungarian proverb (ca. 1800)

There are no facts, only interpretations.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1887)

I could not disguise from myself that even if Holmes's explanation  
were incorrect the true theory must be equally *outré* and startling.

Arthur Conan Doyle (1890)

I see wise men and poets and scholars and artists harmoniously  
building the hundred-gated cathedral of the mind.

Hermann Hesse (1936)

I still believe I will be proved right.

Georges Lemaître (1961)

Life doesn't have endings. It's always moving on to something else.

Peter Weir (1976)

If electrons and quarks—and thus atoms and people—are a consequence  
of the way space-time tangles up on itself, we could at least take comfort in  
knowing at last that we truly are at one with the universe.

Davide Castelvecchi (2006)

Life, says Santayana, is a predicament. I think he's right. All day I feel it in my bones that he is gone. How am I to grieve for him, who now is not but never really was . . .

Sometimes I worry he has made me crazy. Sometimes it seems that this is all a dream. Sometimes I see afar and all I see is shiny. It's a new thing too for me to see ahead at all. I see that things will soon come to an end. All my life things simply ended, or I left, or nothing real began. But this is different. It's month end; walking along Lankershim under the smog blanket that's been leaning up against the hills the last few days I think without volition that a weekly Metro pass should be enough. I'm in subconscious countdown. The big difference is this: I'm thinking of my future.

Around 1790, in what is now Germany, under the pseudonym Novalis a phi-

osopher whose real name was von Hardenberg thought a deep thought: ‘The most wonderful, the eternal phenomenon is one’s own existence. The greatest mystery is man himself.’ His existence ended at the ripe old age of 29. He has *me* thinking now of Frank.

His was a moment of high privilege. Ten billion years of gracefully unfolding universe, a million years of stargazing since mankind stirred, three thousand years of philosophic record, three hundred years of scientific search, a century of revolution, all converging so he can conceive of how it all began. As I told him, trying to damp down pretensions, we stand here on many shoulders. Now I wonder: How well did we do? I wonder too: What have we done? I try to not think: Have we got it right?

“Of course not.”

As if braced for blade I’m stricken and undone. And yet to hear his voice at all is so sensational my heart is fit to burst.

“Nobody gets it right.” His voice is like loose gravel.

It’s true they never did but somehow I thought that we’d done it. Or at least we set it on a better track.

“We did do *that*. The problems say so.”

He is wounded; I can hear it. I have hurt him. Distance would have served him better. Why pine for his presence now? Is it that the endgame’s running? Do I need to feel that it is also a beginning? I would settle for some sort of something with him that continues on.

“It will need a lot of work.”

Not his, he means. Nor mine.

A pause and then:

“I was much further out than you thought ...”

He plucks death’s poet Stevie Smith from off the back shelf of my brain. In a bid to break my heart he whispers:

“... and not waving but drowning.”

I wait. He says no more. So write. Write on. Write to the bitter end.

What claim can I make on his behalf? That *he* has some grasp of reality? Some facts, perhaps, not mere interpretations such as Nietzsche denigrates? Doubly not, in view of Nietzsche’s view interpretations arise from, not truth, but power. What—I ask my pain—would Nietzsche make of *him*? Someone should warn Nietzsche that a dictionary is a single circular-but-tangled definition. Its truths lie in the readers whose reflections of reality assign its meanings. How then shall I stake a claim for him? He has naught but thought, no power—for he knows not of it. Fletcher, maybe Beaumont—just don’t say both wrote it with a single quill. No *Übermensch*, if he has any claim it’s this: He saw the whole; his world

was ours. It's more than Nietzsche could maintain. He knew the revolution was not done. Its closure must embrace the all. Even Hawking says so. Everybody says so, I repeat aloud to reassure myself. I worry that, if we're not on the right track, it will need some different beginning. But he's right: He says that anything too different won't fit the clues. If the beginning is not quite the way he says, Lemaître, and even Einstein now it seems, and he too and I with him, all assert it won't be very different. His Beginning, I am sure now, must be much the way it was as twisty braids of space that we call matter burst into the world.

I keep in mind the need is for a finished revolution. It will need a new ontology. He offers some of that. His vision opens up the prospect of a whole new physics and new math. When it's done, the quantum cosmos should be at the center of the physics map. What the world may do with this in hand I can't imagine. So I worry—it is my obsession—what can we foresee? New intellectual and social progress? Of these there would seem small room for doubt. New disputation rooted in new self-asserted certainty? New social ills? These too I think, as fragments of the latest terror victims decorate our stage. I would like to be responsible but only for the better stuff. Is there no way to pick and choose?

The bloggers blog about the harm we do our planet. These worries are misplaced it seems to me. The planet will soon fix itself; it has fixed worse. But I do worry—even bums in funds can worry. I fear that its fix may abolish *us*. Whatever may emerge, no doubt too late, of other tipping points, we are far past the one for passing on a viable economy, a train that left the station some time back. This thought puts me in mind of sitting on a wooden S-Bahn seat in 1990. We're on the Zoo to Friedrichstrasse line, reopened by the falling of the Wall. Young and old jolt by the barbed wire of that disappeared divide, all heading home to East Berlin—their prison a few weeks ago. It is their eyes that get me. Everywhere I glance they're dancing an aversive minuet. I watch what they watch as we watch and what, too, they do not watch or they glance and swiftly swerve away. No part of this, my friend and I have yet a part to play. Obvious outsiders, we will gawk to see where, days ago, *it* used to be. They know we will. So, stubbornly, I don't. And nor does she. Their disappointed expectation seems to me the only unity they share. I watch the eyes. The accusations of the young. It was so easy, they all say in stabbing silence, targeting their elders with their glancing gaze. *We* did it; it was easy. So why didn't you? And in the old eyes, their not quite guilt but impossibility of answer. It's a new divide.

What shall *we* say of our stewardship? What will *they* say, they who soon will be the young, the generation who will live with lessness? What possibility remains to us for a reply? Unless . . . unless perhaps we might pass on to them a birthright, such ideas of such potency as might lead to a new economy as inconceivable as

cellphones, CPUs, genetic codes and googling were a hundred years ago. They too need hope.

It needs a lot of work.