

Another Affair at 7, Rue de M--

It has been 9 years since the “The Affair at 7, Rue de M--”.

I achieved such success with “Sartre Resartus” that I decided to relocate permanently to Paris and start my own publishing house. Using the popular “Resartus” series as a base, I managed to create a business of some breadth.

The older children grew up with healthy interests in the social sciences and I fully expect them to take positions in my publishing empire. However John, now 17, unduly influenced by my practical Swiss secretary, started to develop an interest in the “scientific” workings of the world. I had assumed that this was simply a phase in his development. After all, his older sister had once written a curious paper entitled “Couleurs des Fleurs”, which oddly, did not even mention Plato's or even Goethe's philosophical discussion of color but rather concentrated on whether color transitions early in a flower's existence could predict the course of its life and eventual demise. Sacrebleu!, why would one of her station write a paper on a subject of concern only to gardeners and farmers? Fortunately, she lost interest in such diversions and continued her education in Language, History and Literature and is now responsible for our holdings abroad.

But I digress. When I heard that John had applied not just to our traditional schools in Europe and France, but one in Cambridge Massachusetts as well, I was not alarmed. However, when he received an acceptance together with a silver tube, I asked “Why did Harvard send you a silver tube?”. I then discovered the awful truth. The acceptance was from MIT.

I attempted to question him slowly and rationally about how he had made such a series of clearly misdirected decisions. However for the first few minutes, all I could get out of him was: “I got in! I got in!”.

After he calmed down, we had a long discussion. I mentioned the rewards of studying traditional subjects such as Literature, Philosophy, History, Oratory and Economics. John had always professed to enjoy rational thought and argument. Why then, I asked him, would you allow the confounds of the real world to interfere with the reasoning processes given to you by God? He said that sometimes reason detached from reality gave incorrect answers. How can they be incorrect, I asked, if the axioms are correct and the process of deduction is also correct? He then asked me a simple question “How much is four billion sheep plus four billion sheep?” “Eight billion” I answered quickly. “No”, he said. “There are not eight billion sheep in the world”. “What”, I asked “does that have to do with anything”? He continued with further incoherent ramblings (one was “If one Mona Lisa is worth \$100M, how much are two Mona Lisa's worth¹”) for a brief bit before he settled down.

Apparently MIT entrants are supposed to use their tube as an integral part of some project. He mentioned several different projects he wished to pursue and I said that I would like to follow his progress. This would take some reading on my part to become familiar with what he was doing, but

1 From “The Mathematical Experience” - Philip J. Davis and Reuben Hersh

this is only engineering after all, so I expected it would take no more than a few hours to become familiar with whatever combination of aeronautical, biological, electrical, mathematical, mechanical, chemical, optical, electromagnetical, architectural, civil or marine concepts he employed.

He first created several duplicate tubes of identical dimension with which to practice. He started by cutting the tube down and created an exact replica of Galileo Galilei's first telescope. "Derivative" I replied. He agreed. He then started creating a series of more and more elaborate devices: a kaleidoscope, a music box with the pins penetrating the outside and the harp on the inside, a spectroscope, a gas laser using low pressure CO₂, a holographic projector, and on and on and on. Clearly this effort was going in the wrong direction. He obviously hoped this succession of toys would impress me, while I hoped he would eventually tire of the effort and see reason.

Then, when my annoyance grew to the level I had last known only when hearing bubble gum pop, the tube moved. My son watched with ghastly fascination as the tube continued trembling. He then moaned and in one incoherent outburst said "Oh God, it's like the bubble gum all over again". "What do you mean"? I asked. "Your animus is so great that even inanimate objects try to escape it." he replied. Not a theory I would expect from an engineer, but I was too busy to respond. I snatched the tube up, put it in the same Bell jar the bubble gum had occupied and sealed it shut.

The tube tried numerous ways to escape, finally settling on folding and refolding itself into different origami shapes. My son stayed awake days, dutifully recording every origami fold the tube tried. Past exhaustion, he finally agreed to sleep only if I promised to watch and record the tube's every move. In the ensuing hours, the tube grew more and more agitated and finally started repeating a set of folds that took it from a simple length, to a square, to a cube to something indescribable.

Then it simply disappeared.

When my son awoke, he asked for the log of observations and started mumbling something about a Fields medal. Alas, the records were incomplete. What was recorded is in "Appendix: Sequence of foldings leading to the tube's escape" My son's theory was that the tube had learned how to transition from one spatial dimension to two, then from two spatial dimensions to three and finally from three spatial dimensions to four and so finally disappeared.

Well, good riddance I say.

After many discussions, I allowed my son to enter MIT, with the promise that he will attend classes at Harvard as well.

With this distraction finally behind me, I am ready to dive into meaningful work. My new book "Tacitus Resartus" will be out in the spring.

Appendix: "Sequence of foldings leading to the tube's escape"

<Editor's note: The tube discovered a truly marvelous series of foldings, which this format is too narrow to contain. For a copy, please send 5,00 € to "7, Rue de M--" to cover postage and handling.>