“Just as poetry is itself a means by which the rules of language are transcended, so, too, metaphorical historiography is the means by which the conventional rules of historical explanation and emplotment are abolished. Only the lexical element of the field remain to be done with as the historian, now governed by ‘the spirit of music’ desires.”

(Hayden White, on Nietzsche’s theory of history, Metahistory, 372)

Down, down came Zarathustra from the high path. With the sun he came — bright, bright like honey, that light off the white snow. And he greeted the eagle that, in its contempt for earth, had fed boldly on its own talons.

“Oh, eagle who can only soar, how the heart of Zarathustra is gladdened by your boldness in this alpine dawn! You, who rightly grew strong on the liver of Icarus as he fell, bold bird!”

And with that, the heart of Zarathustra, being so moved, brought tears of joy and salt ice to his eyes. When he had wept well, he lifted his voice to the eagle, still circling overhead, “let us find, today, down in this valley, a Historian — and let us wash the ink from his hands in the spring of life. You shall lift him up on your great wing and teach him your ways this very day!” And with that, Zarathustra came down the mountain, with the legless eagle soaring before him.

Entering the town, Zarathustra went straight away to the Small World Coffeeshop, where he found Professor Burnett working on his laptop. “Greetings, earth-being upon which the scent of cheese and gherkins is strong! Thou pourest over historical matters, I perceive, and are in diverse ways most besmirched by the miserable matter of accounting for things. Rise up, lift your eyes, and say unto Zarathustra with what toil you toil in the ways of the Interweb.”

“I write of the murder of many, Zarathustra, and of the near death of one — my kin — who fell to earth making acts of war in 1945, but did survive,” answered the history professor. “I was actually just now trying to figure out the exact time that my grandfather’s airplane was shot down over Tokyo. It seems that some of the escort flights from Iwo Jima left later in the day than I thought, and that messes with my claim that he probably crash-landed within an hour of the Hiroshima bomb? I’m going over some archival stuff that I found posted on a Reddit site about his getting shot down, and trying to figure out if any of the Army Air Force records include the sortie times. These here, see — these are the digitized crash records, but I can’t figure out if the time was listed on this sheet of the form, or on a different one. So I am about to write an email to the National Archives to inquire about records of the 21st Fighter Squadron. Though I might also write a post into this moderated thread, because a lot of these aficionado historian guys — I think sort of mostly creepy
dudes in their basements in their sweatpants endlessly reliving the second world war — really know a lot about these archives, and all the details about pretty much everything that happened from 1939-1946!"

“O peasant!” replied Zarathustra. “I do see. And grievously the sickly nature of your feces-eating doth afflict me! Zarathustra, Lover of Truth, did hope to find in you the brave comradeship of those kissed by the Truth of Truths, but here we find you, my eagle and I, willfully stuffing your mouth and eyes with tiny little truthlettes, these pathetically tiny-tiny flakes of dust ground from the archives of time, specks too small to seed the thunderheads of Zarathustra — nay, smaller even than the microscopic airborne particles from the Krakatoa of all minor truths, which powdery tidbits at least do contribute to the rosy hues of those nice long sunsets that Zarathustra likes so well!”

And with that, Zarathustra wept again, but bitterly this time, for he did see that the historian was a sad sack.

Collecting himself, Zarathustra did mightily blow his nose on a vast handkerchief he carried for that purpose and resumed his labors among the human things to whom he had resolved to offer some foretaste of what must yet be birthed beneath the sun. “O historian, you do appear to me as like a worm, furiously laboring to fashion for itself tiny, tiny handcuffs out of the infinitesimal detritus of the dead! Futility and fatuity vie fiercely for your impotence, for thou has not eyes to see the dust for which to make your handcuffs, and that dust is anyway too small to see! Moreover, thou has not hands with which to fashion those handcuffs, nor upon which to wear them — and all the while I see you shrinking to become small enough to make use of these tiny particles you can neither see nor use!”

At these words this historian, whose buttocks was immensely sore from long hours in the hard chair trying to figure things out about the past, did stretch his lower back and wonder if Zarathustra did not possibly have a point. And he spaketh undo Zarathustra, saying, “You know, Z, that’s a great point, and I think I’m going to go and get a double espresso and an almond biscotto. Why don’t you go ahead and take a swipe at this and I’ll be back in a few minutes.” And with that, he pusheth the laptop towards Zarathustra and asked, “do you want anything?”

Already Zarathustra was draping his long loden coat with the removeable shoulder cape over the back of an adjacent chair and taking his place at the keyboard. “No,” he spaketh, "but you can get a brownie for the eagle.” And he set to work upon the keyboard.

About twenty minutes later, the line being immensely long, the historian returned. “I have brought thee a blondie for thy eagle, the brownies having been entirely already consumed by others.” “That’s okay,” spake Zarathustra in reply, “the eagle doth devour blondies. Let’s go outside and feed it to him and discuss these matters further.”
But the historian, regarding the blank screen upon his laptop, was sorely discomforted and spoke from his downcast heart, saying, “Hey, I thought you were going to do this assignment for me — what gives? You haven’t written a word!” With great force, in reply, Zarathustra did press his two main fingers against his lips and made a mighty shushing sound, before beckoning and saying, “Silence, peasant! Outside Zarathustra shall give you your homework while we feed the eagle.”

And together they exited the coffeeshop.

Outside, on Witherspoon, Zarathustra stood on one of the small benches, his arm outstretched for the eagle-which-could-not-land-upon-the talons-he-had devoured, and that eagle did flutteringly nibble at the blondie.

And as he did so, Zarathustra did commence most wildly to gesticulate and shimmy, his hips wiggling and his legs kicking as in an Irish clogging jig — and the historian was sore afraid, and also many people upon the street, the common citizens of Princeton, New Jersey, did move away from Zarathustra and the eagle and the historian, and did giggle unto themselves — although also some did seem to take fright, especially the older people and the children. And to accompany this ecstatic boogying Zarathustra began to howl like a wild hyena and shrilly thing at great volume.

“What the hell are you doing, Zarathustra?” the historian did ask, “You are freaking everyone out, making a total ruckus!”

But Zarathustra kept up his antics, and eventually the historian just went back in to the coffeeshop, packed up his stuff, and went to class.

On the way, it occurred to the historian that perhaps that was what Zarathustra had to say about the 6th of August 1945.

*

And then, as he got to class, it occurred to him, the professor, that his own account of Zarathustra’s account of things is pretty ironical. But there was nothing ironical about Zarathustra...