

A Hairy Subject

Lately I've read several theories purporting to explain the alarming increase, as they call it, in violent crime over the past few decades. In my innocence I had supposed that economic factors would explain a lot, if not everything, and I was not too persuaded by other explanations. But now I've come across a theory that convinces me completely.

I found it in the account of a notorious crime written by the famous chronicler of such goings-on, William Roughead. It's in an article called "Poison in the Pantry" (1929), describing the activities of Dr William Pritchard, the Glasgow physician who murdered his wife and mother-in-law (on separate occasions) in 1865.

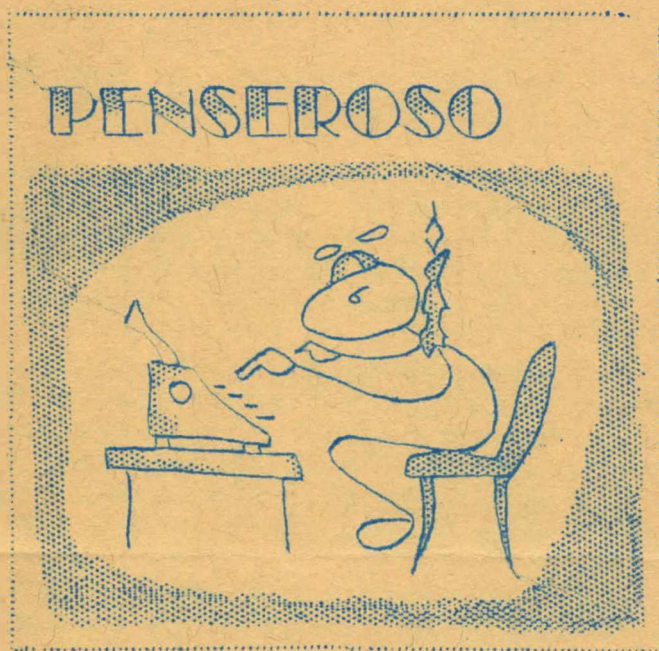
Roughead writes: "I have often wondered that no philosopher has considered the strange affinity between crime and whiskers.... That most of the homicides of history have been hairy-faced folk, sealed of the tribe of Esau -- Cain was certainly unshaven -- admits of no dispute..." He reminds us that King James VI and M. Landru were both bearded, and adds, "Of all such unscraped scoundrels Dr Pritchard may be hailed as king and emperor.... In these days of whitewash and psychology it might be plausibly maintained that no man so heavily handicapped with hair could be otherwise than wicked, the umbrageous growth in question, like the fabled Upas Tree of Java, blighting all within its baleful shade."

Yes, indeed, our crime wave of the past several decades must have been caused by the prevalence all this time of beards (and perhaps, though Roughead didn't mention it, long hair, which surely is equally "handicapping"). I think that this discovery should be communicated to all the law enforcement agencies immediately. I regret that J. Edgar Hoover is no longer with us to take charge of the scissors and razor.

Strange Strondes and Sondry Londes

Once upon a time, a long way back in another world, Gretchen had a chance for a faculty appointment, I think it was at SUNY Brockport or perhaps it was SUNY Binghamton. In fact, she was one of the six finalists for the opening. She didn't get the job, but for a while we had to face the possibility that she might. "What will I do if I'm offered the job?" she asked me one night, having called a council of war between the two of us.

"Well, you'll have to accept it of course," I said. "Jobs in academia are too scarce these days to turn a good one down."



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"Heavens," she said, or probably something much more pungent, "what have I done? I don't want to live in the east."

"I don't even want to visit the east again," I said gloomily. "It's dirty, overcrowded, hidebound, uptight -- an awful place. Once I thought it would be wonderful and exciting to live in New York City, the cultural center of the country, but now -- I'd rather live in Tucson, Arizona if I had to choose one or the other."

We remembered how distressed she was, years earlier, when she was told with proper solemnity that to write an acceptable Berkeley dissertation she would have to do research in Europe. We had held a council of war then, too. We discovered that each of us had a strong reluctance to travel to Europe again for any reason. We had each visited Europe once, separately, but we weren't eager to return.

"We're getting hidebound," Gretchen said darkly. "We're getting stick-in-the-mud. But I've lost my desire to travel anywhere except maybe to places in the west. I'm a westerner by nature. The rest of the world doesn't really interest me anymore."

"You're giving up so much!" I told her, spreading my arms and turning all the way around to encompass the universe. "The Taj Mahal reflected in silvery splendor! The Pyramids at sunrise! Tokyo in cherry blossom time! You'll never see the Petit Trianon, the Victoria and Albert museum, St Paul's or Santa Sophia. You'll never see Sutherland falls, Rindjani volcano, Lake Chad, Chimborazo, Cotopaxi....!"

"At least we can see the Painted Desert, Mount Shasta, and San Clemente beach again," she said wistfully. We also talked of visiting Mexico, where she had lived for seven years. Unfortunately she never lived to see once more most of those places, and of course while they are beautiful and well worth seeing, they aren't quite the same thing as the wonders of the great world beyond.

There are many wonderful and exciting places I will never live to see, either. It is a melancholy fact, but -- like Gretchen -- I have lost my spirit of adventure. I have become an ancient, a fuddy-duddy, a provincial. If I won a year-long all-expenses-paid trip around the world, I would probably say, "How about two weeks in San Luis Potosi instead?" I don't even want to go to Paris again, as all good Americans are supposed to do when they die. As a ghost I think I will haunt some place in Berkeley, maybe the neighborhood of Prince and Wheeler streets. The wide world? "When I was at home, I was in a better place."

The Man With the Glassy Gaze *

"Ich bin zu den Leuten freundlich...." -- Bertolt Brecht

On a recent sunny afternoon I was stopped safely, sanely, and even legally at a red traffic signal on San Pablo avenue in Oakland or maybe Emeryville when a big Ford pickup truck came charging up behind me. In

* This incident took place on 19 July 1973. This account was written shortly afterward, but was never before published.

the rear-view mirror I saw that it wasn't slowing down as it drew near, and I felt the impulse to pull ahead, but before I could do so the VW, already almost as ravished in the rear as a character in a Laney anecdote, took still another pummeling from behind. The truck braked only belatedly and slewed violently into my car with a noise that sounded like the crash of cymbals. Luckily no one was ahead of me, for I felt the VW lunge forward about five feet.

"My god, Amos, get up! The cat's broke every dish in the house!" I shouted. After settling my head more securely on my shoulders I climbed out to inspect the damage. Despite the collision I could find nothing amiss. I thanked whatever gods may be for the fact that the VW has a Rear Bumper. Then I glanced up at the driver of the pickup, which was stopped hard against the back of my car. He was an elderly, greyheaded black, who was staring fixedly at me. His glassy gaze seemed not entirely due to the fact that he was looking through the windshield.

I don't have much racial prejudice. I was almost as annoyed at him as I would have been if he were white. I cuffed back my cap and walked up to him till I was ranged alongside the driver's window. "What the hell?" I said in reasonable tones. "What kind of driving is that?"

He didn't look at me. He lowered his head and regarded the steering wheel very intently. "Glub-bub-bub-glunk-gerumph," he said.

"What?" I said, rubbing my chin dubiously.

"Blug-bloog-blubble-boo."

I eased my cap on my head and pondered this remark solemnly. The fellow still didn't look at me. "Kriggle-quiggle-blunk-blunk," he added after a moment. I stared at him for a while in baffled exasperation. He continued to gibber unintelligibly. Finally I gave up and walked back to my car. "What the hell?" I asked myself as I drove away.

Later, at home, I told Gretchen about the incident. "All the fellow did was gabble at me. 'Gluck-gloople-blup' -- like that. What was ailing him anyway? Was he talking Swahili? Was he in shock from the collision? I guess he must have been drunk, or stoned."

"Were you dressed as usual?" she asked. "Were you wearing your Mao cap?"

"Sure."

"With the red star on it?"

"Of course."

"Did you have your shades on?"

"Naturally."

"And you were garbed in your usual lumpen fashion, and unshaven, looking more or less -- aside from the cap and the fact that you aren't Japanese -- like Toshiro Mifune in 'Yojimbo'?"

"Well, I wasn't wearing a kimono, either," I said, "but otherwise...."

"The poor man was scared of you," she said. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, scaring an old black man like that."

"Scared of me?" I said, somewhat nettled. "I spoke to him in a calm, unemotional fashion. How could I have scared him? I think I even smiled at him."

She mentioned "Yojimbo" again. She recalled the scene late in the movie when Toshiro Mifune is captured, brutally beaten, and escapes, with blood still streaming down his face. Takashi Shimura, the sake merchant, regards him with horror. After Mifune flashes him a tough grin, Shimura says protestingly, "It's even worse when you smile."

She quoted the line to me, and added, "In that get-up you looked like the smiling killer. Of course he was frightened of you."

I could only shake my head. Frightened of me? Of good old, peaceful, kindly Redd Boggs?

Campaign Promise

Please! Don't elect me president of the United States in 1988! I ask this favor just on the off-chance that you are thinking of tossing my hat (or cap) into the ring. I know how impressed you must have been with my leadership as president of SAPS during 1984-1985, but believe it or all right don't, I might not please you as the Chief Executive of this country.

I'm flattered, I really am, that you might think I could succeed Ronald Reagan (!), but the truth is, I'm not quite bloodthirsty enough to make a good president. Even if I knew that the enemy had launched nuclear missiles against us, and these were on the way to wipe us out to the last man and woman, I would not push the button to send our own missiles off in retaliation. Why slaughter uncounted millions of innocent people in revenge? No, I wouldn't do it. That's a promise.

Freddy

- 1. Freddy catch hoes 9 thousand
- 2. Freddy will never be single
- 3. Freddy is a forever lover you know
- 4. Freddy will always be pimpin
- 5. Freddy is a true blue lover
- 6. Freddy ran --

[Graffiti on successive BART pillars in El Cerrito, copied in March 1983. Soon afterward obliterated.]

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