

A dystopian satire set in the near future, Mediaevil's stories within story are initiated by unorthodox scholars pursuing extreme education to empower their university to become a bulwark against the evil and/or stupidity propelling humankind toward a new dark ages. A great deal of diverse character backstory is integrated with history throughout.

MEDIAEVIL

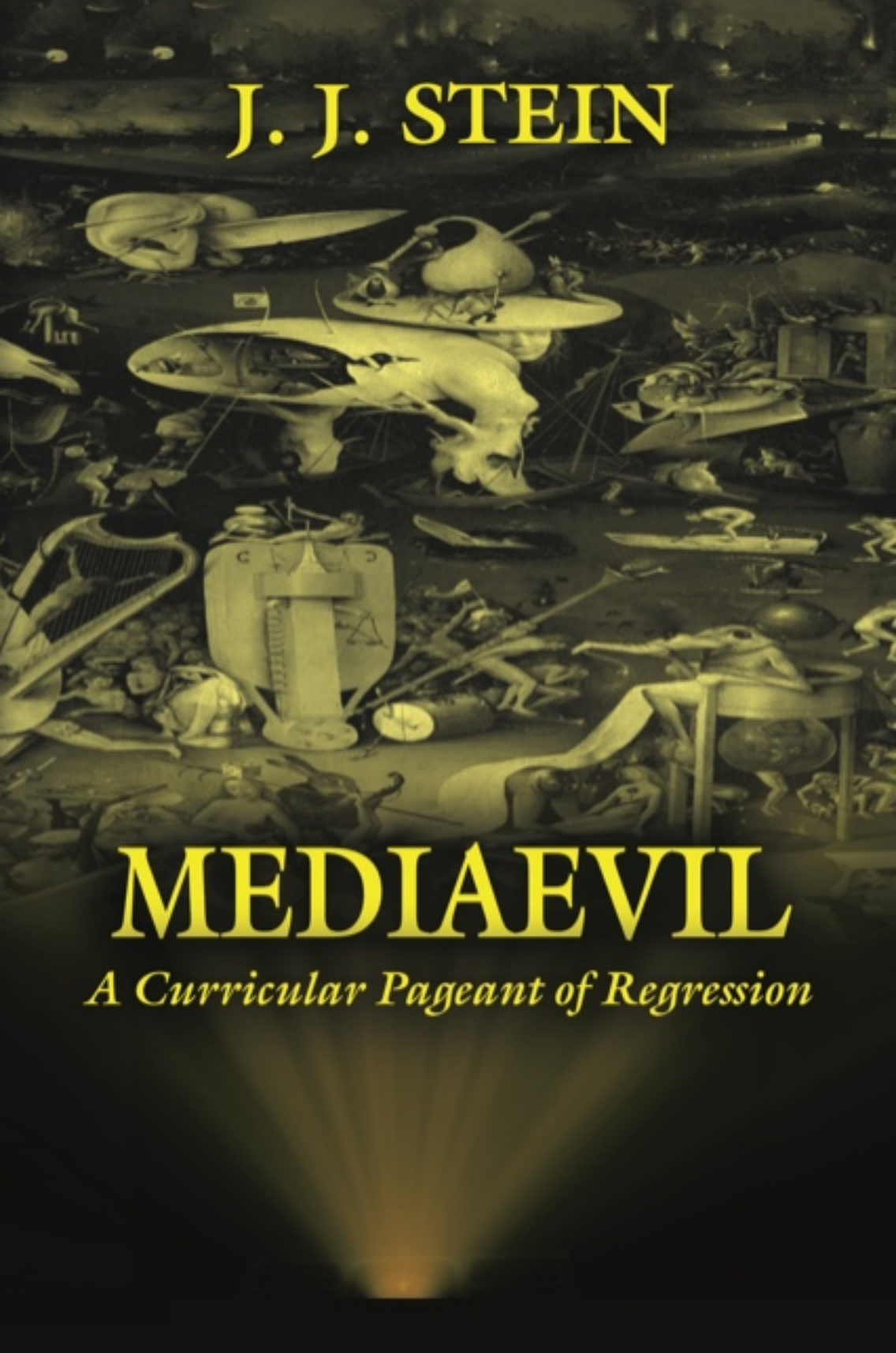
A Curricular Pageant of Regression

by J.J. Stein

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J. J. STEIN

MEDIAEVIL

A Curricular Pageant of Regression

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MEDIAEVIL

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Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. Evil always carries within itself the germ of its own subversion in that it leaves behind in human beings at least a sense of unease. Against stupidity we are defenseless. Neither protests nor the use of force accomplish anything here; reasons fall on deaf ears; facts that contradict one's prejudgment simply need not be believed – in such moments the stupid person even becomes critical – and when facts are irrefutable they are just pushed aside as inconsequential, as incidental. In all this the stupid person, in contrast to the malicious one, is utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, becomes dangerous by going on the attack. For that reason, greater caution is called for than with a malicious one. Never again will we try to persuade the stupid person with reasons, for it is senseless and dangerous.

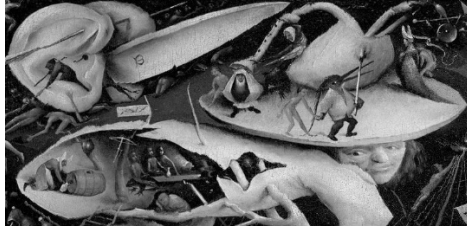
Dietrich Bonhoeffer
*Letters and Papers
from Prison*

*The most important question anyone can ask is:
What myth am I living?*

Carl Jung

ACT I: THE LAND OF NO MORE

*Always exactly where we begin.
Even if in the middle.
Especially if at the end.*



CHARACTERS

*Some make the world go round.
Others work to end it.
And then there are those who believe
They are above it all.*

STRINDBERG

Psychology Professor Dr. Lawrence Strindberg was mesmerizing. Everyone said so. They had been saying so for more than thirty years. Word of mouth caused students to sign up for his course, "Original Sin, the Media and Inevitable Evil," as early as second semester freshman year hoping to make it off the waiting list by their senior year. The venue for this class had changed to larger facilities each succeeding biennial as his reputation had grown until he was presenting in the new Creamer Performance Hall, complete with multimedia screens and theatrical lighting. Dr. Strindberg was a campus celebrity; a university dilemma.

The hall was overflowing as usual for the introductory session. Student monitors were placed at all the entries to check registration. Arguments broke out between these sentries and other students intent on attending the course regardless of registration. Most often the monitors were shamed into relenting when confronted by their peers. Or they had already abandoned their posts, having applied for monitor duty purely as a means of gaining entry themselves. So along with all the seats, the aisles were packed with students and more stood along the walls.

The commotion of seating stopped abruptly when the theater lights went dark, the spotlights came on and Strindberg marched onto the stage wired for sound like a rock star. Applause erupted as he stalked to the lip of the proscenium and stared out at the crowd with fierce brown eyes. His disheveled shock of long white hair, leonine features and stocky muscularity completely filled the bill of a biblical prophet hardened by 69 years on planet Earth. The hanging video screens spaced throughout the arena served to heighten his God-sent grandeur, especially since his countenance expressed the visage of wrath.

His full-length black cloak (modified from his doctoral commencement gown) was splayed open exposing a large black gothic capital "V" emblazoned on a blood-red muscle T-shirt. The effect had the audience members hooting, hollering and clapping with delight. That was until, like a magician, he pulled an unsuppressed short-barreled AR-15 from under his cloak and pointed it directly at the student body.

“Cacophonous sycophants!” his amplified voice reverbed like head-thwacking thunder. “Cut your mindless crap right now!” And they did, right in mid hoot and clap, not only because of the gun, but because now he looked totally insane. Rumor had long had it he walked a very fine line.

“Lights!” he said, as if commanding the heavens. And like lightning closely attending thunder, the spotlight on him went out and another from above and behind flashed on, picking out and temporarily blinding chosen members of the audience.

“You!” he said, pointing the weapon menacingly at a shaggy-bearded English major in the third row on whom the spotlight stopped. Strindberg was lit now only by a single red footlight that made him appear as a phosphorescing Lucifer. “You, with your disdain for hygiene. Why are you here?”

The student looked awkwardly to either side, particularly because a comely blonde was sitting on his left. “Disdain for hygiene?” he said, defensively.

Strindberg locked a clip into the AR-15 with an angry shove that indicated he wasn’t about to suffer fools. “Answer the fucking question!”

“Strindberg, The Great,” the student squeaked, trying not to squirm.

“What? Like Houdini?”

“Who?”

“Jesus, save me!” Strindberg shook his head and walked to his right along the edge of the stage. Muffled laughter rippled through the audience like a sigh of relief.

The spotlight behind Strindberg moved with him as if emanating directly from his burning eyes. It stopped on a large heavysset girl sitting in the first row of a rear section. “What’s your major?” Strindberg demanded.

The girl looked all around. “Me?” she asked, as if surprised anyone, much less Strindberg, would talk to her.

“You got a problem with that?”

“Ah, no.”

“Speak up!”

“Anthropology.”

“Dead people, huh?”

The audience laughed thinking he was cracking a joke. He cut them off by firing two shots of the modified assault rifle at

the ceiling. "Why are you here? Speak!" He glared at the hefty girl who was looking up like the rest, wondering if a body was going to fall.

Eyes still full of wonder, she looked back at him. "Everybody says you shouldn't be missed. You're worth all four years of tuition."

"Why?"

The girl didn't answer. She looked around again for help.

"Tell me why, or get the hell out of my class!"

"Because you're crazy brilliant!" the girl blurted out.

"Crazy? You like crazy? Is that what turns you on? Strindberg strode to the left side of the proscenium. "Is that what turns all you idiots on?" The spotlight tracked where he looked. It settled on a preppie type in loosened tie, herring-bone jacket and jeans. "Pre-med, right?"

"Crazy like a psychic," the student quipped.

"Ain't you a smart one? You like crazy?"

"I'm into psychology."

"Then why the fuck haven't you called campus security in this gun-free bubble? Why haven't any of you called the police to get the armed lunatic off this stage?"

No answer came back. It was as if the entire audience held its breath for a punchline. Strindberg started pacing the stage. "Nobody?" He looked out at them as the spotlight roamed. "Nobody?" He returned to the pre-med student. "Come on, Mr. Psych. Analyze!"

"We've been told to expect the bizarre from you. This is how you teach. It's what makes you so... so spectacular."

"Stupid! Stupid people," Strindberg shook his head. "I should shoot you all right now. No fight or flight left in your highly educated hides. Much less goddamned sense. Drugged by internet hype, brutality of the day news, 9/11 aftershocks, zealot militia firefights and so many accumulating Columbines, Virginia Techs, Tucsons, Auroras, Sandy Hooks, Charlestons, San Diegos, San Bernardinos, Orlandos, Vegas, Parklands, El Pasos, Odessas; Umpquas, Umpquas, Umpquas..." he trailed off and then picked up again, "that you've all finally succumbed to poor Hamlet's nihilistic whine: 'All the world's a stage full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' So give us ever higher decibels and ever more furious fury. We love it! Can't get enough of it! Yeah! Yeah!"

Yeah! you sing.” He stormed all around his stage brandishing the AR-15 like a deranged mass murderer playing an instrument of death until he stood on the far right edge. “Is that all of it, then? Have I got all the reasons you stupid lemmings have lined up here for communal suicide, instructed by the gospel of your own campus Pied Piper?”

The spotlight of his eyes came to rest on a mature African American woman in the aisle seat of the first row. She looked like Cleopatra might have on her best days. She wagged her head disapprovingly, which made him nod, though not smile. Instead of asking her anything, he returned to center stage and focused on the shaggy-haired English major. “What about evil?”

“What about it?” the English major asked.

“You like it as much as crazy?”

“Definitely adds spice.”

“Only spice? Come on. It makes the world go ‘round, doesn’t it? How many of you took this course not only because of me, but because evil excites you?”

A few brave souls, including the English major, raised their hands. “Come on! Come on! Get those hands up. Be honest with yourselves for once. I have it on authority from Dean Kurtz himself that no other course at Braverton gets crowds like this one. It’s your fascination with evil, isn’t it? Isn’t it? Raise those hands!”

Slowly, but surely, the hands went up until it seemed all were counted except for maybe the African American woman and a few others.

“You bet your asses!” Strindberg said. “Evil is your thing!”

The black woman whispered to herself, “None more than yours, Larry. None more than yours.”

The Creamer Performance Hall multi-media control booth sitting high above the audience was state of the art. Everything from lighting to backdrops could be commanded at the touch of a key. Even the big flat screens strategically mounted on variable tracks above, behind, in the wings and out front, were guided by remote control. Pre-programmed was the operative phrase because at the helm of this electronic heaven was a cherubic grad student of Media Applications named Boothe Trevecca who had worked closely

with Dr. Strindberg to make all his truculent forking of lighting appear as if matters of Olympian whim.

Boothe was not Trevecca's given name, but rather acquired because of his mastery of the control booth firmament. Mervin was his original name, which to his mind negatively emphasized his cherubic complexion no matter how he tried to corrupt it with a fuzzy red beard. (He had gone by "Merlin" for a while in his quest for names to aptly express his technical wizardry.) And contrary to his appearance, he directed his crew like a demon conductor of heaven's symphony, jabbing his wand behind their backs at the keyboards and video monitors. Yet hardly a word emitted from his mouth—just a few gasps of triumph into his headset—since all had been pre-programmed, as described, with camera, projector, lighting, and sound techs sitting at their stations tapping keys on cues, following the script.

"Black-out!" Trevecca rasped, unable to control himself, while Strindberg glared at the audience following the reverbing, "Evil is your thing!" And with that all were blinded by pre-programmed darkness. Trevecca had even connected to the exit signs to make them go out. As well, the glowing lights in his hovering control ship were doused.

"Hold it... Hold it..." Trevecca whispered while the seconds stretched to minutes and the discomfort of more tremulous students began to rise, first in the rustling of bodies, then in mumbling to neighbors, until one of the most disturbed finally yelled, "What the fuck?!"

"Now!" Boothe timed the only really necessary direction to materialize images of Superman, Batman, Spiderman, and Jesus of Nazareth coming to the rescue on four of the suspended flat screens.

"The magic words," Strindberg confirmed throughout the darkened hall. "*What the fuck?* – said out of fear, confusion or anger. They cast at least a dim light on the subject." Here a dim light faded up on Strindberg as he rose now atop a scissor lift until positioned next to a fifth screen that magnified him larger than life in his "V" costume aping the other superheroes, flying, swinging and walking purposefully.

"Feel like a cave, did it?" Strindberg consoled. "Bring to mind Plato's cave, maybe? I hope at least a few of you have

had the liberal arts benefit of reading that ancient autocrat's supple analysis of human behavior. What did those chained in the cave do to the one who escaped and returned to coax them out into the colorful 3-D world he'd discovered?" Instead of the AR-15, Strindberg now wielded a Darth Vader laser saber, slicing it through the crowd until it stopped on the chest of a mighty football tackle. "What did they do?"

The tackle looked at the red laser wound on his chest and then back up at the Prof on high. "Uh.... Didn't read that one, sir," he said.

"They killed him! Drawn and quartered. Hung him high. Tore out his entrails. Nailed him to the cross."

"Wow! All that?" the tackle said.

"I don't recall that," a voice called out from the distant darkness.

Strindberg turned his head trying to locate the direction of the voice. His huge visage on the big screen turned with it. "A wise ass in the crowd. What do you know that I don't? Bring up the lights so I can find you." And all the house lights came on like a sun flare. "Okay, where are you? Do you have courage only in the dark?"

"Over here!" a blinking frat boy yelled, pointing at a thin olive-skinned girl who already had her hand up.

Strindberg glared at her. "Classics major?"

"Sociology," the girl said. "Philosophy minor."

"So what's your problem, Ms. Sociophil?"

"The allegory was more about the one who suffered enlightenment having to come back into the world of the unenlightened to save them, to pull them out into greater consciousness. The story never dealt with their killing him. It was more about his willingness to subject himself to their limited consciousness again and whether they would be willing to suffer the light of soul he offered."

"You don't like my ending?"

"Not really."

"Do you know where I got it?"

"Your intention of shocking us?"

"Good one! You're a brave, smart girl. But try the Jesus stories, for example. The writers of the New Testament knew what the mob would really do to idiots that tried to make them suffer enlightenment. With their lust for bloody drama,

they wrote the kind of identifiable ending to Plato's horror story they knew would keep their audience enthralled. And it has enthralled us ever since. So don't accuse *me* of concocting it. Dim the lights!"

The house and stage lights went down, focusing attention on the bright screens displaying the superheroes. "Here are the questions," Strindberg said. "What is the meaning of the virtual creatures on these screens? Are there any differences between them? You have two minutes to write your answers on paper (if you still know how to write on paper) and turn them into an aisle monitor. The first one I read with a correct answer will get my personal recommendation to any remaining graduate school, corporate monster or brothel of his or her choice. Not that it matters anymore. The clock is ticking."

A smattering of students chuckled. Some were offended depending on where their various lines of offense were drawn: religious, moral, or linguistic. Others bent their heads to the task, while most just stared wonderingly at costumed Christopher Reeve, Michael Keaton, Tobey Maguire, Max von Sydow and Strindberg himself, all frozen now on their screens in the midst of doing impossible super acts.

President Harmon Friedlander and Dean of Academic Affairs Seymour Kurtz sat in Kurtz's office with Chief of Campus Security Oscar Washburn. They were watching Strindberg's performance on a wall of video monitors being fed by Boothe Trevecca's wizardry. If it weren't for Friedlander's occasional observances at the Braverton United Methodist Church on Isaac Street, his dyed black beard could have him be mistaken for either a reformed Hasid or old time Mennonite.

"I don't know. I don't know," Friedlander said. "He gets more outrageous every year. Alumni complaints are growing, not to mention offended parents that have heard about his language and insults. And that doesn't even consider possible lawsuits for slander, religious prejudice or some such thing. You're sure you checked that the gun was loaded with blanks?"

"We practiced with it over the weekend. He was very careful," Chief Washburn nodded his bald head. Washburn

was a robust African American nearing fifty who rarely wore the uniform of his position. Instead, he roamed the campus in sweat pants, looking more like an undercover athletic scout than a cop. “You should see his script. He leaves nothing to chance, even allowing for improv, and rehearses obsessively. I hazard his alter ego is actor-director-playwright.”

“Damned entertaining,” Kurtz said. “A method to his madness. And the bucks he’s brought in. No prof has put more in the coffers. How many students registered there now? Five, six hundred? Times how many thousands a piece? I wish to hell he’d teach the damned course every year.” Kurtz was more suited as a chief financial officer than academic dean. His PhD was in business administration where he still taught a graduate course. “We’re reinforcing in the biz school that superficiality can’t rectify this deteriorating world. Ingenuity and creativity are the only things that’ll resonate. Look at Oscar here in his track suit. He gets the message. Strindberg’s drummer favors tympani, cymbals and gongs.” Kurtz loosened his happy face tie and put his Hush Puppies up on his desk.

Friedlander eyed the tiny hinges and clasps on the bottom of Kurtz’s Hush Puppies, wondering what secrets he carried in those soles to give him such certainty and hope. “All the equipment and manpower to put on this one show,” Friedlander said. “We have profs that lecture to three hundred without such a circus.”

“Yeah, and they’re the lowest rated on the faculty,” Kurtz rebutted. “The manpower is all from the Media Applications Department getting the work-study experience we want them to get. Why’d we put so much capital into these facilities if we weren’t going to use them to the fullest? We should bow down to Strindberg for helping us develop the premier Media Applications program in the country. Media intelligence is the goddamned future (if we’ve got any future at all), and I’m glad I pushed to put us ahead of the curve.”

Friedlander was clearly at odds with himself. Media intelligence was not a world he was comfortable with having mastered little more than the ability to email (which wasn’t much use anymore). “Still,” he said defensively, “Strindberg’s message is just too dark for these dark days.”

Strindberg had come down in the dark from his scissor-lift roost to a podium on the stage where he received the written answers student aids had collected from the audience. All the superheroes continued hovering on the video screens, though their freeze-framing shuttered now as if one or another was about to break out of the electronic bonds that held them in check. Strindberg read the first paper and threw it on the floor. "Wrong!" he said. He read the next, crumpled it up and threw it after the first. "Wrong!" This continued until he had littered the floor. "Wrong and wrong again."

With the umpteenth "Wrong," he balled up the paper and threw it at the screen of Max von Sydow as Jesus. "What's the matter with you people? All brainwashed by the same priesthood? Of course! Why am I not surprised, since this occurs year after year? 'Jesus is real, as opposed to the others,' you all say, though some (no doubt the Jews, agnostics, or Buddhists) say 'was' instead of 'is.'"

Strindberg walked to the edge of the stage again. "So what the hell am I? Virtualman?" He pointed to the bold V on his chest. "Am I not here in the flesh to awaken you to the truth? Am I not realer than Jesus? I have a mind to condemn you all to Virtual hell. That is, if you weren't there already."

Acting highly hurt, as if maybe he was Vindictiveman instead of Virtualman, Strindberg alternately moped and stormed about the stage. Finally, he stopped and stared out at them. "Look," he said, sweeping his arm high, indicating all the screens, "All those jokers up there are phantoms of your impotence, Jesus included. Just wavelengths of your wishes to be saved from yourselves. Metaphors. Allegories throughout time. Summer after summer Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Ironman, Wonder Woman, Black Panther or Jesus the Christ came back like clockwork with the most boffo box office litanies to save the day for all us characters who are incapable of it ourselves. Superheroes, oh, rapture! We loved them; paid dearly for them; lapped up their comic book crap like dotting dogs unable to fill our own bowls. Go home and cogitate about how whatever digital superhero adored now with streaming dollars or pilfered downloading is just a projected incarnation of feeble hopes that you and our pathetic world will be forever saved by some invincible other... And why?"

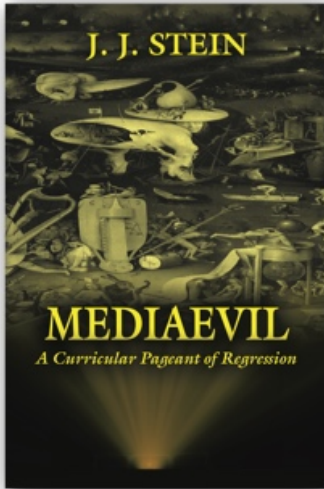
Strindberg turned his back and started walking upstage, then stopped, stood there for perhaps thirty seconds before he about-faced. “Oh, yes, one of you distinguished that Jesus offers eternal life in the heavenly hereafter, which these other superheroes don’t. Good point, though it ignores any of a number of pre-Biblical demigods that prefigured Jesus’ assumption. Seems like the creators of our latter-day superheroes have missed that opportunity, focusing as they do on Earthly salvation. I think I’ll write eternity into my script for Virtualman, though. As Virtualman, I’m here to offer you eternal *virtual* salvation if you’ll just give all your beliefs in your heavenly selves up to me. I’ll accept your attendance at the next class as a mark of such devotion. Until then, I *virtually* absolve you of all your sins. Now go out and create more mayhem.”

The curtain dropped in front of Strindberg, the lights went out and all the screens shut down except for the one of Strindberg, now unfrozen as Virtualman, hovering above the audience with flaming eyes and palms raised in benediction. The audience sat mystified, not knowing if the end had really come or this was just another dramatic effect. Then as the lights slowly came up and Virtualman faded to black, virtual emissions of release exhaled from their collective thrall, and they began to rise.

DANIKA & JASON

The Brewster on Dalton Street behind Creamer Performance Hall was a former cow barn converted into a funky stable of nooks and crannies where students of all persuasions could hang separately studying econ or Islam while sipping diminishing assortments of coffee and tea. The olive-skinned “sociophil” major that had disputed Strindberg sat at a table in a middle stall backed by barn wood. Axe-cut railings partitioned the two sides of the stall. Some books and papers covered the table around her coffee cup while her Rollup Wonderpad was intermittently engaged in receiving whatever wireless babble was still available in spite of the Brewster’s pre-industrial decor.

Across the room at the rough-hewn order bar the supposed pre-med student, who had also sparred with Strindberg,



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