Last Rites

The waves sound uniform to the casual ear - coming and going at their allotted moments, each at regular interval from the last. But to the seasoned observer a thousand minute differences can be heard. Here the spray has gone that much further than last, dislodging an ancient shell. Now the drag has been extended by a fraction of second more, giving the quiet roar of the sea's return a correspondingly infinitesimal burst of fervency. Busy as he was, G would never pass on the opportunity to appreciate this subtle symphony. This was one of the joys he relished when his work took him by the coast — and it often did, for his work took him everywhere often enough. The next wave dissipated at unusually slow speed, as if the foam clung onto its coherence in stubborn defiance of G's gaze. With a chuckle G took this for a sign to get back to work, and entered the small cottage in which his business was to be done.

There he found P, hunched over his desk as ever. His pen had fallen from his hands, and his eyes closed peacefully, presumably in satisfaction at the work just finished. Not wishing to make this any more difficult than it needed to be, G waited a moment for P to realise he was there of his own accord. Soon enough, P was aware of G.

P: Ah. I see. Well, this is disappointing. No offence intended, of course.

G: Think nothing of it. Few welcome my arrival, and it usually bodes ill when they do.

P: Your arrival is not so much what bothers me, rather it is your being anywhere at all. Your existence - this is what disappoints me.

G: What is this, the great philosopher surprised at mortality? Did your teachers neglect to mention my inevitability in all your classes on logic? Never was a variable bound in my name?

P: Well that is just it, I would have counted that a type error. That all will die, this was predictable and indeed predicted by any mode of induction that responds appropriately to available data. But that death should be Death, a named individual… and pray how should I refer to you sir?

G: G

P:… thank you, that death should be G, an object in the domain of persons and personas. That seems altogether unlikely. In fact…

G: In fact what?

P:… in fact it occurs to me that given reasonable priors it is more likely I am hallucinating this very conversation than that I am indeed talking to the anthropomorphic representation of biological entropy's inevitable end.

G: I… you… what? You do not think you are talking to me, right now? Is this some philosopher's sceptical game?

P:

G: Answer me, mortal, remember that while you are still here I am still your king!

P:

With P's second refusal to answer G felt a pang of anger, but soon it dissipated. Time was, in the arrogance of his youth, G would have tormented this mortal for their impudence, revelled in the usurped dominion he had over this realm by making P regret their error in ways only G knew how. But that was before the Chastisement, or at least before he had truly taken its lesson to heart. G now knew that for all his airs he was but a caretaker, that P would soon be beyond his grasp. Was P's impudence any worse than his, any more embarrassing than the very pretensions to royalty with which G had tried to extract conversation from P? With age, with acceptance of what was

inevitable, he had come to be forgiving of others, if only as practice in hopes that he may one day do thus for himself. He decided to humour P some more before they parted ways.

G: Ok, ok. Let's talk this through. You do not believe I am real. Presumably for that reason you now refuse to answer me - after all, who would you even be talking to? Why bother reasoning with a hallucination? Well I assure you I am real - indeed there was once a time when I was all that was truly real - but let me indulge you in your delusion. If I am a fiction, who is the author of that fiction?

G stopped to wait for an answer, but P studiously avoided G's gaze; in fact P gave every impression of being lost in a pleasant daydream, oblivious to G's reasoning. Quite sure, though, that P could indeed hear what was being said, G continued.

G: Well if my author were anyone other than yourself then you would, I think, have to grant me at least this degree of reality - I am somehow a product of their consciousness, and may contain insights or wisdom that this author made available to me. In that case why not try to access it through conversation? Or perhaps do you think I am a fiction without an author? In which case you yourself might want to spell out what metaphysic could make sense of such a notion, if only for the intellectual challenge.

P:… I did not mean, of course, a fiction without an author. And not for any metaphysical reasons, no such could or do exist. Rather because of the conceptual-linguistic incoherence of such an idea. Instead, the proposition I presently consider most credible is that you are simply a hallucination of mine. Do you have any means by which you could prove to the contrary?

G: Come now P, what do you want of me? I cannot very well disprove "you think, therefore I am"! We are in a cottage house miles from any other potential witnesses who might corroborate my presence, you yourself…. Wait, that is it! When I entered, you yourself immediately recognised me as I am! You know, clearly and distinctly, the nature of my Task and who I was that came to guide you. Is not your own admission sufficient to the point?

P: Just the opposite! Knowledge comes in one of only two forms. Either synthetic, which is knowledge of factual matters concerning the external world. Or analytic, which is knowledge of the truths that may be deduced a priori from our linguistic conventions. Were you an external reality then to know what it is you do and are would be a synthetic matter. Yet apparently I knew this supposed fact before any experience that might be pertinent to the matter. That suggests facts about you you are somehow more akin to analytic truths, which is to say the result of some convention or supposition I have adopted; perhaps due to latent neurosis, or bad cheese.

G:… I will not be reduced to cheese by a sophism! You know me, mortal, by the familiar bonds we have formed in your moments of anxiety, much though you may have tried to suppress them. But ok fine. Look, by your reasoning it follows, does it not, that if I know something you do not I cannot be what you suppose me to be? After all where would the knowledge have arisen from?

P: Hmm, let us grant this.

G: Right, so, then, this is easy enough: the third soldier to cross the Rubicon after Caesar himself was left handed, those plastic tips on the end of shoelaces are called aglets, the Hodge conjecture is -

P: I am afraid I must interrupt you dear G, but it is immediately apparent that nothing of this sort will convince me. You may assert all sorts of things and claim them as knowledge. But to me these are as yet just assertions. To be assured of them I would have to know they are true - evidently that would rather defeat your object.

G: … Bugger. You don't happen to have the internet in this time period do you?

P: The inter what?

G: Your grandkids are going to love it.

P: Be that as it may, I remain unpersuaded. Now if you will excuse me I shall retire, and wait for this vision to end. Tomorrow I must check myself into a hospital to ensure this is not symptomatic of something serious.

G: My friend I'm afraid it is maximally serious. But come now, I have an idea of what may yet persuade you! These mere utterances I put forward, I grant, cannot persuade since they cannot be independently verified. How about, however, the content of your sensory impressions?

P: I do not follow.

G: Well, presumably if I am but a reflection of your imagination, then any imagery I produce can only be such that it is either drawn from your experience or recombining the elements thereof, right?

P: I suppose so, yes.

G: So if I produced images that you could not trace back to origins in your experience then I have proved to you I am no mere figment of your imagination?

P: That makes sense, but can you do it?

And so G granted P eyes that they may see what mortals may never witness. Death in His true form towered over P. In the magnitude of his disaster he was as if a thousand suns were to arise from the ocean's depths one sorry midnight, tearing the waters asunder as they radiated out an impossible darkness that froze every atom alone in its place. Yet in an infinitely extended moment before each was thus frozen they were caught in a constant agitation, accelerating through a universe's worth of experience only to find themselves on the precipice of a stillness they could never quite attain. Time, destroyer of worlds, had here found its avatar; and it looked down upon P, using as its eyes the final moment of every star in the galaxy as they blinked out their last. Its eternal ravenous hunger now surrounded all like a choking mist through which nothing else could be seen, even as the dark suns' anti-light blasted them and the groaning of a fractured ocean overwhelmed all other noise. The majesty of the night sky and its ocular supernova now lost and the terror of a frozen impenetrable darkness how upon them, P finally saw Death as he really was. Pitiable, a meek thing, as lost and alone as each one of those dying stars it took for eyes, their majestic swan song let out for a universe that can never appreciate them as they deserve.

P: Perhaps I should look into pottery classes.

G: …

P: Tomorrow, that is. Sorry, I do not mean to interrupt our conversation, I was just thinking aloud.

G: For you there is no tomorrow! Did my true form not impress that upon you!?

P: Oh no, not at all. It occurred to me shortly after you began that I had accepted a premise quite erroneously. While it is true that if you produce images or sensations I cannot self-generate it follows that you are not a creation of mine. But it does not follow that you have proven, in the pertinent sense, your independence of my will simply because I cannot trace the origins of these particular sensations. Ever since Freud and Marx we have known full well that our inner lives are not fully accessible to our conscious reasoning, after all. So I still think the most likely possibility is that you are a fiction of my own creation, and that I perhaps have an artistic side that ought be explored more fully in order that it may receive a healthier and less morbid expression.

G: And you waited until after the… the mists of hunger, the frozen oceans' tortured screams…. until after all that to let me know!?

P: Well you… I mean I… seemed to be having fun, and it felt rude to interrupt.

G: Gosh you philosophers are insufferable! P, you are known as an empiricist, a rational philosopher who reasons from the plain evidence of their senses and considers hypotheses with a sober and unsentimental eye. Yet here faced with the reality of Death, faced with me, you seem to be attempting to dodge the inevitable, to refuse to see what is before you. I can only speculate that it is out of fear, and fear of death is unworthy of a philosopher.

P: While you flatter me, G, in ways I am not fully sure I have earned, I may at least defend myself on one count here. It is true that I am an empiricist - and it is this, not fear, which compels me to disbelieve my own eyes. For, as an empiricist I take to be true that which is rationally licensed by my total experience of the world. One evening of strange phantasmic visions does not yet suffice to overcome a lifetime of the world's impersonal regularity, especially not when I am aware of psychotic breaks and other such purely mental phenomena that might produce such evidence.

G: Well I have heard, with one who argued with me before in much the like now I think about it, of refusing to believe in other's claims as to miracles. But never in refusing to believe one's own! You are clearly a person of good sense, education, and learning, and I know you are not so humble as to deny of yourself these things. You have nothing to gain by self-deception in this moment, nor anything to lose by at least exploring the possibility I am right, and these events are happening in the familiar confines of your isolated beach study wherein you know there are no mechanisms or persons who might deceive you. If under those circumstances my presence is not credible even to oneself then when ever?

P: That is just it, G. No isolated event, no matter how favourable the circumstance and how unable to explain otherwise by reference to an identifiable flaw in my person or reasoning capacities, could suffice to outweigh a lifetime's worth of counter evidence. Whether it be a world or a person, once disenchanted not even a miracle directly witnessed can bring us back to faith.

By this point, despite or maybe even because of his frustration, G was rather fond of P indeed. So he broke his usual policy and tarried a while. They went for a walk along the coast, chatting now as old friends who had set aside the topic of G's identity and the Task he had yet to perform. Of course eventually, inevitably, there was a parting of the ways. P smiled warmly at G, thanked him for the conversation, gave a curt bow — and without acknowledging the incongruence walked out over the water and into the light.

G looked back along the shoreline to the old cottage. He foresaw that in its own way this would soon escape his grasp. The waves would make their slow advance, with meandering step each unlike the last they would tread further and further up the beach. By this process the cottage would be eroded. Many aeons would go by and then, soon, the oceans themselves would slip away. The stars, the night sky, heat and light and life; all would fall silent. And thus so would he, as an age emerged which had no need for him and his Task. In time he too would have his rest.