

Muster of Triviums:

*a reflection on Nicholson Baker's The Mezzanine
in Two Parts*

by Steven Augustine

1. Trivial Pursuit

“There was this whole tradition of new criticism that swept across the 20th century. The poem was kept utterly distinct from the writer's life. Biographical considerations were kept out completely. That's complete crap. Of course the fact that Coleridge had a laudanum habit is germane to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." So, to a certain extent, readers are right. Readers are right when they read a book like *Lolita* and think "Well, Nabokov must have had a thing for little girls." How could he have written 300-some pages with lovingly obsessive descriptions about downy hair on Lolita's arm, if it wasn't something that really got to him? You can take that a little too far. What Nabokov was doing was maybe taking one tiny chip of himself and then putting it under the highest powered microscope that he had and then subjecting it to many different strange sidelights and coming up with a whole book. To make an equal sign between that tiny chip and how he was as a person is a mistake. *The Mezzanine* is about 87% myself. *Room Temperature* is a little bit more. But *The Fermata* is purely fictional and not like me at all.”

-Nicholson Baker, interviewed by Alexander Laurence and David Strauss

"Style is not a tool, it is not a method, it is not a choice of words alone. Being much more than all this, style constitutes an intrinsic component or characteristic of the author's personality."

-V. Nabokov

“I mean, you see, I think if you could become fully aware of what existed in the cigar store next door to this restaurant, I think it would just blow your brains out! I mean...I mean, isn't there just as much "reality" to be perceived in the cigar store as there is on Mount Everest?”

-Wallace Shawn, *My Dinner with Andre*

"To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle."

-George Orwell

“Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita...”

-Dante, *The Inferno*

In the essay “Reading Aloud” (from *The Size of Thoughts*, Vintage Books, 1997), Nicholson Baker writes of the first time he performed a public reading of his work. He describes the until-then page-bound words he reads for the audience as having “unfolded themselves like lawn chairs in my mouth and emerged one by one wearing large Siberian hats of consonants and long erminous vowels and landed softly, without visible damage, here and there in the audience...” (heretofore-unused metaphors have such wonderfully rough edges) but the milestone develops a flaw.

“Things went pretty well until I got to a place near the middle of the last paragraph, where I began to feel that I was going to cry.” A passage about a dead friend? An epiphany? Formative incest? No,

“... the sentence that was giving me difficulty was a description of a woman enclosing a breakfast muffin in bakery tissue, placing it in a small bag, and sprinkling it with coffee stirrers and sugar packets and pre-portioned pats of butter.”

Baker goes on to describe his struggle to keep from weeping on stage, and to explain the complex provenance of this strange reaction. He doesn't identify the book or quote the passage. Even after a second or third careful reading of the essay, there's a good chance the reader will remain unable to connect with Baker's personal (and very peculiar) reasons for nearly losing it over a *sentence about a bakery tissue, coffee stirrers and a handful of butter pats*. Bafflement in the face of a recondite passage, however, is good if it inspires the reader to dig deeper in order to clear things up. Even if the resultant discoveries/conclusions are “wrong”, the digging (the antithesis of skimming) is good.

The read-aloud passage that tugged Baker to the brink of embarrassment in his first public reading (at the Edinburgh Festival) is from his first book, *The Mezzanine*, a fact we can deduce from the year of the reading (1989) and the date of publication of his second book, *Room Temperature* (1990). *The Mezzanine's* plot, such as it is, follows the first half of the working day of a 25-year-old office worker named Howie as he,

1. Breaks a shoelace.
2. Chats with Tina the secretary.
3. Urinates successfully in a corporate setting (Howie usually has problems performing this feat).
4. Washes his face and leaves his office building.
5. Eats a half a bag of popcorn.
6. Buys a new set of shoelaces.
7. Eats a hot dog and a cookie with some milk.
8. Makes his way to a half-sunny green bench, sits there with a paperback on his lap.
9. Returns to the lobby of his office building and rides the escalator therein back up to the mezzanine where he works.

It's difficult to imagine a more trivial sequence of actions to string together for a character to perform over the course of even so short a novel. The triviality of the sequence is either a statement (eg, “Let's not do ‘epic’, ‘uplifting’, ‘weepee’, ‘high-stakes’ or ‘outrageous’ ...”) or a statement about statements (eg, “This is not a statement, but a sincere reflection of my interests at the time...”), but this non-plot, along with the microscopically descriptive ingenuity Baker lavishes on quotidian objects and gestures the plot hinges on and turns up, combined to give *The Mezzanine* a quirky-little-curio status that was very much in vogue at the time.¹

¹ There was something pleasing about the natural fit between Baker's novel and the board game that fans of the novel were most likely to play, back then, which was *Trivial Pursuit*; they shared a whimsy-glazed

Most young male writers of Baker's intelligence, education and generation probably saw themselves, at some point, as Stephen Dedalus, and their work in relation to Joyce, so it's easy to see *The Mezzanine* as Baker's formal challenge to himself (and his readers) to try on the voluminous trousers of a spiritual ancestor. Joyce, with a pervert's avarice for phonemes, wrote World as webby tissues of Word, while Baker writes everything out (even thoughts) as manufactured item. The difference is possibly religious: Baker's mind is not priest-ridden; Joyce's was not shaped to America's post-War abundance. Whereas Joyce's universe feels like a thunder-driven sneeze, Baker's comes, one trinket at a time, with material confidence, off a conveyor belt. Still, there's a family resemblance: *The Mezzanine* and *Ulysses*, in their fancy minutiae, are laddishly cloacal², sweet with smart-alecky wit and stiff with patentable metaphors.

An impertinent sketch of a possible family tree might put Joyce as a great uncle, Nabokov as grandfather, Updike as dad and Baker as eldest son, insofar as we may trace Updike, in his apprenticeship, to pathologically-descriptive mentor Nabokov, and Baker, in turn, to Updike via Baker's admiration for Updike's *Nabokovian* attributes (this admiration dramatized as a comical stalking in Baker's homage/memoir, to and of himself and Updike, *U & I: A True Story*).

David Foster Wallace's "trademark" footnote-mania as on display in *Infinite Jest* is sometimes (though Baker is by far the less-famous of the two writers) reckoned as a steal from Baker (*The Mezzanine* preceding *Infinite Jest* by about a decade), but neither writer invented the use of footnotes in fiction. It isn't hard, though, to imagine Wallace reading *The Mezzanine* and wishing he'd written it, or thinking to himself that he could do better by bringing an epic, humanist plot to the formal (and possibly elitist) *apparent* barrenness of Baker's twee-but-envy-seedingly original work. It's not a stretch to see Wallace as the tragic little brother to Baker's eldest son in this genealogy of a lacquered intensity of style.

pedantry which successfully packaged a specific kind of nostalgia for a subculture of new adults who could still remember hoarding Star Trek arcana (rather than baseball stats) as a collective talisman against the fuckless ordeal of High School. Appealing to roughly the same demographic, at roughly the same time, was a best-selling pseudo-dictionary titled *Sniglets (snig' lit: any word that doesn't appear in the dictionary, but should)*, published by a smart-alecky comedian named Rich Hall. It would not have been unusual to visit a friend, on a Saturday morning, who was in possession of all three artifacts as well as a videocassette of Louis Malle's *My Dinner with Andre*... in order to watch *PeeWee's PlayHouse* on the Television.

² "In the sudden quiet you could hear a wide variety of sounds coming from the stalls: long, dejected, exhausted sighs; manipulations of toilet paper; newspapers folded and batted into place; and of course the utterly carefree noise of the main activity: mind-bogglingly pressurized spatterings followed by sudden urgent farts that sounded like air blown over the mouth of a beer bottle." (*The Mezzanine*, pg 83)

"By word and deed he encouraged a nocturnal strumpet to deposit fecal and other matter in an unsanitary outhouse attached to empty premises. In five public conveniences he wrote pencilled messages offering his nuptial partner to all strongmembered males. And by the offensively smelling vitriol works did he not pass night after night by loving courting couples to see if and what and how much he could see? Did he not lie in bed, the gross boar, gloating over a nauseous fragment of wellused toilet paper presented to him by a nasty harlot, stimulated by gingerbread and a postal order?" (*Ulysses*, Circe Episode)

The bloodline in this genealogy is a rare bloodtype that produces very fine metaphors. In books by Joyce, Nabokov, Updike and Baker, metaphor, the family trade, trumps moral and plot. Picture a slightly-starved Eve in spectacular jewelry and that's the family crest. Baker is an unerring metaphor machine; his products, as Joyce's often did and (cautious) Updike's sometimes did, hazard the risky wire between (and above) originality and ridiculousness³.

When Baker writes, in a footnote, "...staplers were like locomotives in that the two prongs of the staple make contact with a pair of metal hollows, which, like the paired rails under the wheels of the train, forces them to follow a preset path, and [...] they were like phonograph tonearms [...]" he treats us to a Capra-esque montage of booming post-War industry, commerce and swing-music before we grind into the station at the end of the sentence, which is followed by a sentence that carries on by comparing stapler punctures to TB vaccine marks.

When Nabokov required his students of Russian literature to be able to diagram and describe a *wagon-lit* in which Tolstoy's Anna Karenina would have ridden, Nabokov was steering their attention to the only objective truth of those passages. Anna Karenina herself was a figment of Tolstoy's imagination: she never dreamed, ate, breathed, slept on such a train or defecated. To the extent that Anna Karenina is "real" or "true" (ie, a recognizable description of a human female), she is not particular; her particularity cancels her truth. The objective truth of the *wagon-lit's* set-dressing is a necessary anchor for the etherial meringue that is the flesh of the never-living undead of Tolstoy's imagination and Nabokov, I think, thought this way. The objective truth of the set-dressing helps us to accept the plausibility of an Anna Karenina who *might* once have lived, though she (in Tolstoy's detail) is truly impossible as anything other than his dream. A character in a novel has no soul; an object in a novel doesn't need one.

Likewise with Nabokov's *Lolita*, whose misery we can never really "feel" (all PC affectation to the contrary) in the language of its particularity. *Lolita* is less real, or true, than the motels Humbert drives her to. When we read, late in the book, that *Lolita's* "complex ghost would come to [Humbert], shedding shift after shift, in an atmosphere of great melancholy and disgust, and would recline in dull invitation on some narrow board or hard settee, with flesh ajar like the rubber valve of a soccer ball's bladder," the sentence registers with us aesthetically, philosophically, morally and even physiologically, but it doesn't go in our Truth folder because Nabokov is not concerned with the "truth". He's telling a riddle the fun (yes, fun) of which is in the solving. If Nabokov himself doesn't grieve over *Lolita*⁴, why should the reader? If there is

³ See the *Cossacks-in-lawns* example in paragraph one of this review.

⁴ "By the way, when we visited Robbe-Grillet, his petite, pretty wife, a young actress, had dressed herself *à la gamine* in my honor, pretending to be *Lolita*, and she continued the performance the next, when we met again at a publisher's luncheon in a restaurant. After pouring wine for everyone but her, the waiter asked, 'Voulez-vous Coca Cola, Mademoiselle?' It was very funny, and Robbe-Grillet, who looks so solemn in his photographs, roared with laughter."

“emotion” in a smart book like *Lolita*, it’s deliberately buried in the language. Teasing it out may very well require recourse to biography.

Kubrick’s film of the novel spotlights the logical difference: watching Lo with her head on Hum’s shoulder in a ’54 Chevrolet 3100, or pouting in the back of a ’57 Chevrolet Two-Ten, we realize that only the cars in these scenes aren’t acting; only the cars are real. This show is not being staged in order to make us face ourselves, or weep, but to delight us (not pornographically, but intellectually) in the manner of a complex crossword. Nabokov wasn’t quite ready to do away with the formalities of plot, but he had jettisoned emotion.

So imagine Kubrick’s *Lolita* minus Sue Lyons, minus James Mason, and with lots of close-ups of various features of the interior of the Chevy Two-Ten, plus a running, personal, scholarly-digressive-obsessive commentary by Kubrick himself. Imagine the kind of novel such a film would be based on. Imagine laughing out loud at some parts of this hypothetically weird novel and being strangely moved (despite the book’s best intentions) by others... and that would be something like reading *The Mezzanine*.

Despite the funny bits in *The Mezzanine* (and there are many), Baker circles two fairly weighty epiphanies with his non-plot, the first to do with *self-consciousness* and the second with *world-consciousness*, the two nicely linked by the nudging pun of the overlap between the word “mezzo”, from the famous first line of Dante’s inferno, and “mezzanine” in the book’s title. But it isn’t at midpoint between birth and death that Howie finds himself on the escalator of life, but half-way on his journey towards middle age, which he projects (with a numerical value of 40 years) as the point at which he “would finally have amassed enough miscellaneous new mature thoughts to outweigh and outvote all of those childish ones,” a reflection that colors most of the book, which trades extravagantly in the illuminated detritus of a happy, precocious childhood. The book is largely a eulogy to Howie’s childhood.

Howie, an observational prodigy like his author (at eight, Howie realized, for example, that “anything, no matter how rough, rusted, dirty or otherwise discredited it was, looked good if you set it down on a stretch of white cloth, or any kind of clean background”), rides an escalator, every workday morning, to the limbo location of his job between the first and second level of its complex. At the 25-years-old of his place in the book’s general present, Howie’s already two years on from the **Epiphany One**, which he locates in “the very day that my life as an adult began.”

For reasons having to do with the dramatic arc of this section of this review, let’s address **Epiphany Two** first.

Epiphany Two occurs near the story’s end, after Baker’s Ulysses has found himself a bench with a three-quarter view of the “neck-defying” object of his office complex. He

plans to enjoy fifteen minutes of deep reading. He takes a bite of cookie and a mouthful of milk and reads from a “thin volume” (thin as *The Mezzanine*) of the Penguin Classic of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*, figuratively choking on the following sentence:

“Observe, in short, how transient and trivial is all mortal life; yesterday a drop of semen, tomorrow a handful of spice and ashes.”

Howie recoils. Baker writes, “Wrong, wrong, wrong! I thought. Destructive and unhelpful and misguided and completely untrue!-but harmless, even agreeably sobering, to a man sitting on a green bench on a herringbone-patterned brick plaza near fifteen healthy, regularly spaced trees, within the earshot of the rubbery groan and whish of a revolving door.”

Howie/Baker flashes his weapon at the spectre that rises from the offending aphorism. He shifts from panic (“*Wrong, wrong, wrong!*”) to equilibrium in the time it takes to brandish a fierce quickie of acute perception. Being young and acutely alive to the pleasure-puzzle of existence, Howie rejects the fatal cynicism of the long-dead, while being alive enough to the terrible truth of Marcus Aurelius’ insight to draw his weapon at the sound of it. Death being the state of *zero-perception*, we can see how Howie feels protected by zero-perception’s opposite.

If Marcus Aurelius (who wrote *Meditations* in the last decade of his existence and made it to the respectable age of 59) dismisses life as *transient* and *trivial*, Howie defends, substantiates and prolongs it by extending the vertical dimension of experience with his acute perceptions. Baker sees paper clips as Parthenons, re-scales time and slams the brakes on the standard novel’s headlong gallop towards plot resolution and death. *The Mezzanine* is as vertical as, for example, Haruki Murakami’s half-a-thousand-page beach-read, *Norwegian Wood* (out the same year as *The Mezzanine*) is horizontally long. The detail and metaphors in *Norwegian Wood* are as slick and flat as Christmas stamps, hurrying its plot along. Baker’s third book, the sweetly sex-obsessed *The Fermata*, hinges on the conceit that the protagonist is capable of stopping time.

Howie’s *world-conscious Epiphany Two* is that Marcus Aurelius’ (and almost everyone else’) characterization of life as “dust in the wind” is bullshit. But there’s always the chance that Howie’s epiphany is bullshit; that he’s just a bright young death-hating man who’s whistling by the graveyard... which brings us back to **Epiphany One**.

It is just before the midpoint of the book⁵. Howie is 23 years old, new to his job and late for work. Peering down a row of wristwatches exposed by wrists yanked high above

⁵ The precise page-numerical midpoint of the book is given over to a glorious double-centerfold of footnote that free-associates a rapid adventure from the grooves in escalator stairs to those in corduroy to those in skated-upon ice and in a record’s vinyl, exploding into a *Fantastic Voyage*-like metaphor of the grooves of a classical record as skating track and shifting to a nostalgic monograph on the ritual pleasures of using a store-bought mechanical record cleaner... resolving to the calming, faintly epitaphic metaphor of vinyl record as a black lagoon in a “crowded Eastern capital” at the end of which footnote Baker, who has been alternating profligately between the first and second person throughout, ends with a strangely deity-like

cuffs by their hands hanging from straps hanging from a subway ceiling, in an attempt to see how late he is, Howie thinks:

“And this was when I realized abruptly that as of that minute (impossible to say exactly which minute); I had finished with whatever large-scale growth I was going to have as a human being, and that I was now permanently arrested at an intermediate stage of personal development. I did not move or flinch or make any outward sign. Actually, after the first shock of raw surprise had passed, the feeling was not unpleasant. I was set: I was the sort of person who said ‘actually’ too much. I was the sort of person who stood in a subway car and thought about buttering toast --buttering raisin toast, even: occasional contact with the soft, heat-blimped forms of the raisins, and when if you cut across a raisin, it will sometimes fall right out, still intact though dented, as you lift the slice. I was the sort of person whose biggest discoveries were likely to be tricks to applying toiletries while fully dressed. I was a man, but I was not nearly the magnitude of man I had hoped I might be.” (pg 54)

This is as funny (in an evasive way: what are Howie’s *real* regrets?) as it is magically (as in sleight-of-hand) faux-poignant. To accept the eventual changelessness of a self no longer capable of growth is to doff one’s cap at the spectre of the vaster changelessness of death, yes, but this epiphany is too premature, in a 23-year-old, to be taken seriously, in even the most precocious narrator. No, the lede, in this case, is buried, for not a paragraph away, on the same page, is the passage that will cause Baker to teeter parlously, on the brink of unprofessional tears, at the Edinburgh Festival.

“Once there [a coffee shop], however, as I watched the woman briskly open a small bag for my Styrofoam cup and tissue-protected muffin, using the same loose-wristed flip my mother had used in shaking down a fever thermometer (which is the fastest way to open a bag), and then sprinkle the purchase with handfuls of plastic stirrers, packets of sugar, napkins, and pats of butter, I felt an impatience to get to the office.” (pp 54-55)

In “Reading Aloud” Baker’s Byzantine list of possible reasons for that passage’s secret emotional wallop goes:

1. A college competition in which he’d semi-drunkenly choked-up performing the well-known last line of Joyce’s well-known story “The Dead”, the sudden memory of which possibly precipitated a sympathetic relapse.
2. A prior quibble, from a fact checker at the New Yorker, over the word “tissue”, from that passage, in which Baker’s use of the word had been proven correct.
3. Pride about the passage.
4. Contrition for the “mean-spirited contempt” he’d once felt for writers who do readings.

Is it necessary to know anything about Nicholson Baker’s private life in order to enjoy/evaluate any particular work of his fiction? No. Is there beauty, and depth, and insight into fiction itself, to be found in contemplating the sentimental territory that Baker

pronouncement: “Finally my thumb lifted you up, and you passed high over the continent and disappeared beyond the edge of the flat world.” Human consciousness as a diamond needle in an Lp’s groove.

both reveals and attempts to divert our attention from (with a probable lie of omission in an essay; a metafiction, then) in that throwaway line about “Howie’s” mother?
Yes.

2. The Time Machine

“Presently the metal disk that drew near was half lit by sun. Falling from dusty heights of thermal glass over a hundred-vaned, thirty-foot-long, unlooked-at, invisibly suspended lighting fixture that resembled the metal grid in an old-style ice cube tray, falling through the vacant middle reaches of lobby space, the sunlight draped itself over my escalator and continued from there, diminished by three-quarters, down into a newsstand inset into the marble at the rear of the lobby. I felt myself rise into its shape: my hand turned gold, coronas of stage-struck protein iridescenced from my eyelashes; and one of my glasses began to sparkle for attention. The transformation wasn’t instantaneous; it seemed to take about as long as the wires in a toaster take to turn orange.”

-Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine*

“There I found a seat of some yellow metal that I did not recognize, corroded in places with a kind of pinkish rust and half smothered in soft moss, the arm-rests cast and filed into the resemblance of griffins’ heads. I sat down on it, and I surveyed the broad view of our old world under the sunset of that long day. It was as sweet and fair a view as I have ever seen. The sun had already gone below the horizon and the west was flaming gold, touched with some horizontal bars of purple and crimson. Below was the valley of the Thames, in which the river lay like a band of burnished steel.”

-HG Wells, *The Time Machine*

A little more than a fifth of the way through the book, Howie takes Secretary Tina’s inky, rubber-faced time-stamp and presses the month, day and year on his hand. This is neatly hologramic of the gesture of the book itself, as *The Mezzanine*, on one level, reads like a painstakingly Malinkowskyite field-report on the social rituals, toilet habits, tools and possessions of (presumably) white office workers of the year 1987.

It reads, on another level, like a young man’s eulogy to both childhood and the post-War American manufacturing vitality essential to the class, education, and family life responsible for the cosseted intelligence capable of writing such a book. And, by extension: a eulogy to the rational wonders of the Industrial Revolution, which America’s manufacturing vitality was the next grand phase of.

The reader may stub her or his toe on the word “vibratiuncles” encountered near the very bottom of page eight; likewise with “nawab” (pg 27), “opusculum”(pg. 69) or “erumpent” (pg 107), but it’s not difficult to imagine a time-travelling H.G. Wells greeting these archaic rubber-stamp-worthy-curios as old friends in an otherwise baffling era. It’s not difficult imagining Wells and Baker palling around (there’s a pun in there for

the willing) with a mutual, wet-eyed nostalgia⁶ for the wrought-iron ingenuities that tamed the earth in Man's industrial analog of the Enlightenment.

The Time Machine (1895) was Wells' mournfully precocious goodbye to the great, race-strengthening struggle towards (and with) Progress. Wells (in a novella roughly the same length as *The Mezzanine*) visualizes the neat paradox that Progress surges towards the fulfillment of its own End, resulting in decadence. Not to mention bad eugenic hygiene. The once great human race (the white branch, at least), bereft of challenge, has bifurcated into A) a petite tribe of lazy, stupid, sun-worshipping pseudo-Swedes called "Eloi" and B) brutish subterranean cannibals (descended from maintenance men) called "Moorlocks". The Time Traveller of Wells' creation is the gobsmacked witness to this timelapsed degeneration of all our noble dreams.

Wells effectively fixes Man's greatest glory somewhere in the 19th century, arguing that the science-driven *struggle itself*, not the comfort and leisure the struggle eventually wins, is what counts: the glory of the timeline of our ascent is the civilized bulge in its middle, then. By the time the Time Traveller full-throttles his neat little Victorian collectible millions of years years into the future, he sees nought but primordial hellscapes and very large crabs⁷: *all* Progress has stopped, already, long before the free-range Eloi became a Moorlock staple. Wells was writing on a millennial cusp without quite knowing it: the technological difference between 1900 and 2000 was arguably greater than that between 1900 and everything that came before it: it was as though Wells' creative intelligence was a candle flame being tugged by the *woosh* of an exponential curve on the other side of a shut, but imperfectly sealed, door. And the jig his flame was doing unsettled him.

In Baker's version of *The Time Machine*, Howie lovingly eulogizes Penguin paperbacks, vinyl Lps, paper straws, milk bottles, half-pint milk cartons, Jiffy Pop, shoelaces⁸, mailrooms, linoleum, incandescent light in an office setting, paper-based office memoes, Scotch tape, staplers, phonograph tonearms, change-making-belts, paper cheques, Xerox machines, address stamps, telexes, glass doorknobs, Magic Markers, Timex watches, Woolworth rotisserie displays, ice cube trays, Polaroid cameras, carbon paper, typewriters, cigarette-vending machines, snack-vending machines, hot-beverage-vending machines, gumball-vending machines, cups-with-saucers, Rubbermaid shelf-organizers, paper towel machines in public restrooms, Pez dispensers, Disney animation cells, Kiwi shoe polish, paper coin rolls, movable type and cans of frozen orange juice, among other soon-to-be-extinct products and practices.

⁶ There's even a pleasant whiff of the Victorian about Baker's name and facial hair.

⁷ "Can you imagine a crab as large as yonder table, with its many legs moving slowly and uncertainly, its big claws swaying, its long antennae, like carters' whips, waving and feeling, and its stalked eyes gleaming at you on either side of its metallic front? Its back was corrugated and ornamented with ungainly bosses, and a greenish incrustation blotched it here and there. I could see the many palps of its complicated mouth flickering and feeling as it moved."

⁸ I'm the father, of a three-year-old, faced with two important decisions: whether or not to bother addressing the laborious tasks of teaching her to tie her shoes, or how to tell time from analog clock faces.

He dedicates this aria to the ingenuity of the improved design of the half-pint milk carton:

“I first saw the invention in the refrigerator at my best friend Fred’s house (I don’t know how old I was, possible five or six): the radiant idea that you tore apart one of the triangular eaves of the carton, pushing its wing flaps back, using the stiffness of its own glued seam against itself, forcing the seal inside out, without ever having to touch it, into a diamond-shaped opening which became an ideal pourer, a *better* pourer than a circular bottle or a pitcher’s mouth because you could create a very fine stream of milk very simply, letting it bend over the leading corner, something I appreciated as I was perfecting my ability to pour my own glass of milk or make my own bowl of cereal--- the radiant idea filled me with jealousy and satisfaction.” (pg 42)

The Mezzanine fixes (Wo)Man’s finest hour not at the height of the Industrial Revolution but in the heart of his own childhood, after the era of which, we may draw the conclusion, the Great Century of the Artifact gives way to a darker, Digital Age that Baker foreshadows with gingerly (decidedly non-encomiastic) mentions of a CD player, a “computer room” or two and PC World magazine.

“Staplers,” Baker writes, in a footnote I’ve already quoted from, “have followed, lagging by about ten years, the broad stylistic changes we have witnessed in train locomotives and phonograph tonearms, both of which they resemble,” and we can imagine a delighted H.G. Wells, on his tiptoes, eager to catch a glimpse, over Baker’s shoulder, of the marvels Baker describes.