

String Theory

Note: Some frustrating points of his writing, like neglecting connecting words that really should be there (e.g. “aggrieves Knowles no end” instead of “aggrieves Knowls to no end”) even if grammatically incorrect, or use of diction (“these” instead of “those”, “he is himself a grotesque” instead of “he is himself grotesque”). He has a penchant for abbreviation (e.g. N.V.G.B for “Nature Valley Granola Bar”). Use of “and” in footnotes can be a bit much, especially after reading McCarthy, who does it wonderfully. “Joyce lost that final to Thomas Enqvist, now ranked in the ATP’s top twenty and a potential superstar and in high-profile attendance here at Montreal.” His attention to ads works well with his other work like Infinite Jest.

“A tacit rhetorical assumption here is that you have very probably never heard of Michael Joyce of Brentwood/LA. Nor of Florida’s Tommy Ho. Nor of Vince Spadea, nor of Jonathan Stark or Robbie Weiss or Steve Bryan—all American men in their twenties, all ranked in the world’s top 100 at one point in 1995... You are invited to try to imagine what it would be like to be among the hundred best in the world at something. At anything. I have tried to imagine; it’s hard.”

“Players ranked in the world’s top twenty or so, though, tend to play a comparatively light schedule of tournaments, taking time off not only for rest and training but to compete in wildly lucrative exhibitions that don’t affect ATP ranking (we’re talking wildly lucrative, like millions of dollars per annum for the top stars.”

“By the way, if you’re interested, the ATP Tour updates and publishes its world rankings weekly, and the rankings constitute a nomological orgy that makes for truly first-rate bathroom reading.”

“These are special places given either to high-ranked players who entered after the required six-week deadline but are desirable to have in the tournament because they’re big stars (like Ivanisevic, #6 in the world but a notorious flakeroo who ‘forgot’ to enter till a week ago and got a last-minute wild card) or to players ranked lower than 85 whom the tournament wants because they are judged ‘uniquely deserving’ (read ‘Canadian’—the other four players who get wild cards here are all Canadian, and two are Quebecois).”

“The temperamental behavior of many of the game’s top players—which gives the public the distorted idea that most prop players are oversensitive brats—is on a qualifier’s view easily explainable: top players are temperamental because they can afford to be.”

When comparing people to one another he uses “ianly” instead of “esque”, e.g. Kafkanian or Nixonianly or Wagnerian

"...the players moving with the compact nonchalance I've since come to recognize in pros when they're working out: the suggestion is one of a very powerful engine in low gear."

“It took forever to get there from the hotel because I didn’t yet know that press can, with some wangling, get rides in the courtesy cars with the players... Most of this stuff I learned about just as I was getting ready to come home.”

“Watching Hlasek practice is probably the first time it really strikes me how good these professionals are because even just fucking around, Hlasek is the most impressive tennis player I’ve ever seen.”

“...his home base for a long time was Monte Carlo, where lots of European players with tax issues end up living.”

“...past a certain point, impressiveness is corrosive to the psyche.”

“This is typical Joyce-Brakus point. The match is carnage of a particular high-level sort: it’s like watching an extremely large and powerful predator get torn to pieces by an even larger and more powerful predator.”

“Michael Joyce—whose realness and approachability and candor are a big reason why he’s whom I end up spending the most time watching and talking to--will later say, in response to my dry observation that a rather disproportionate number of unranked Canadians seem to have gotten wild cards into the Montreal Qualies, that Brakus “had a big serve, but the guy didn’t belong on a pro court.” Joyce didn’t mean this in an unkind way. Nor did he mean it in a kind way. It turns out that what Michael Joyce says rarely has any kind of spin or slant on it; he mostly just reports what he sees, rather like a camera. You couldn’t even call him sincere, because it’s not like it seems ever to occur to him to try to be sincere or nonsincere.”

“...it’s the sort of love whose measure is what it has cost, what one’s given up for it Whether there’s ‘choice’ involved is, at a certain point, of no interest... since it’s the very surrender of choice and the self that informs the love in the first place.”

“His [Jimmy Connors] game was all the stranger because the racquet he generated all his firepower from the baseline with was a Wilson T2000, a weird steel thing that’s one of the single shittiest tennis racquets ever made and is regarded by most serious players as useful only for home defense or prying large rocks out of your backyard or something.”

“For me, watching McEnroe don a polyester blazer and do stiff lame truistic color commentary for TV is like watching Faulkner do a Gap ad.”

“The applause of the tiny crowd is so small and sad and shabby-sounding that it’d almost be better if people didn’t clap at all.”

“...people’s families back home tending to be wackos, since only wackos will make the financial and temporal sacrifices necessary to let their offspring become good enough at something to trun pro at it...”

“Any normal adult male can hit a tennis ball with pro pace...”

“If you’ve played tennis at least a little, you probably think you have some idea of how hard a game it is to play really well. I submit to you that you really have no idea at all. I know I didn’t... I got to watch Michael Joyce practice several times, right up close, like six feet and a chain-link fence away. This is a man who, at full run, can hit a fast-moving tennis ball into a one-foot square area 78 feet away over a yard-high net, hard. He can do this something over 90% of the time. And this is the world’s 79th-best player, one who has to play the Montreal Qualies.”

“Bismarck’s epigram about diplomacy and sausage applies also the way we Americans seem to feel about professional athletes. We revere athletic excellence, competitive success... But we prefer not to countenance the kinds of sacrifices the professional-grade athlete has made to get so good at one particular thing. Oh, we’ll pay lip service to these sacrifices—we’ll invoke lush clichés about the lonely heroism of Olympic athletes, the pain and analgesia of football, the early rising and hours of practice and restricted diets, the privations, the prefight celibacy, etc. But the actual facts of the sacrifices repel us when we see them: basketball geniuses who cannot read, sprinters who dope themselves, defensive tackles who shoot up bovine hormones until they collapse or explode. We prefer not to consider the shockingly vapid and primitive comments uttered by athletes in postcontest interviews, or to imagine what impoverishments in one’s mental life would allow people actually to think in the simplistic way great athletes seem to think. Note the way ‘up-close and personal profiles’ of professional athletes strain so hard to find evidence of a rounded human life—outside interest and activities, charities, values beyond the sport. We ignore what’s obvious, that most of this straining is farce. It’s farce because the realities of top-level athletic today require an early and total commitment to one pursuit. A consent to live in a world that, like a child’s world, is very serious and very small.”

“But the idea of me playing Joyce—or even hitting around with him, which was one of the ideas I was entertaining on the flight to Montreal, to hit around with a hot young U.S. pro—is now revealed to me to be absurd and in a certain way obscene, and during this night match I resolve not even to let Joyce know that I used to play competitive tennis, to play seriously and (I’d presumed) rather well.”

“The constant movement of civilians past the court aggrieves Knowles [to] no end, and sometimes he shouts caustic things to people who’ve started walking away while a point is still in progress. ‘Don’t worry about it!’ is one thing Knowles shouted at someone who moved. ‘We’re only playing for money! We’re only professionals! Don’t give it a second thought!’”

“Knowles seems to be one of these people who view the world’s inconveniences as specific and personal, and it makes my stomach hurt to watch him.”

“I further confess that I arrived in Montreal with some dim unconscious expectation that these professionals—at least the obscure ones, the nonstars—wouldn’t be all that much better than I. I don’t mean to imply that I’m insane: I was ready to concede that age, a nasty ankle injury in ’91 that I haven’t bothered to get surgically fixed yet, and a penchant for nicotine (and worse) meant that I wouldn’t be able to compete physically with a young unhurt professional; but on TV (while eating junk and smoking) I’d seen pros whacking balls at each other that didn’t look to be

moving substantially faster than the balls I hit. In other words, I arrived at my first professional tournament with the pathetic deluded pride that attends ignorance.”

“Starting on Monday there are a lot of Canadian girls in really short tight shorts and a lot of muscle-shirted Canadian boyfriends who scowl at you if you react to the girlfriends’ I the way the girlfriends’ tight shorts seem designed to make anyone with a healthy endocrine system react.”

“Whether or not he ends up in the top ten and a name anybody will know, Michael Joyce will remain a figure of enduring and paradoxical fascination for me. The restrictions on his life have been, in my opinion, grotesque; and in certain ways Joyce himself is a grotesque. But the radical compression of his attention and self has allowed him to become a transcendent practitioner of an art—something few of us get to be.... Michael Joyce is, in other words, a complete man (though in a grotesquely limited way). But he want more. Not more completeness; he doesn’t think in terms of virtues or transcendence. He wants to be the best, to have his name known, to hold professional trophies over his head as he patiently turns in all four directions for the media. He is an American and he wants to win. He wants this, and he will pay to have it—pay just to pursue it, let it define him—and he will pay with the regretless cheer of a man for whom issues of choice became irrelevant long ago. Already, for Joyce, at 22, it’s too late for anything else: he’s invested too much, is in too deep. I think he’s both lucky and un[lucky]. He will say he is happy and mean it. [I] wish him well.”

E Unibus Pluram

“Lonely people tend, rather, to be lonely because they decline to bear the psychic costs of being around other humans. They are allergic to people.”

“In this regard, 8/05’s Times is a good example of a strange mix that’s been around for a few years now; weary contempt for television as a creative product and cultural force, combined with beady-eyed fascination about the actual behind-the-glass mechanics of making that product and producing that force.”

“And irony is important for understanding TV because “TV”, now that it’s gotten powerful enough to move from acronym to way of life, revolves off just the sorts of absurd contradictions irony’s all about exposing. It is ironic that television is a syncretic, homogenizing force that derives much of its power from diversity and various affirmations thereof.”

“For TV is a bisensuous medium. Its displacement of radio wasn’t picture displacing sound; it was picture added. Since the tension between what’s said and what’s seen is irony’s whole sales territory, classic televisual irony works via the conflicting juxtaposition of pictures and sounds.”

“Despite the unquestioned assumption on the part of pop-culture critics that television’s poor old Audience, deep down, ‘craves novelty’, all available evidence suggests, rather, that the Audience really craves sameness but things, deep down, that it ought to crave novelty.”

“What most of the people I know do is they all sit and face the same direction and stare at the same thing and then structure commercial-length conversations around the sorts of questions that myopic car-crash witnesses might ask each other—‘Did you just see what I just saw?’”

“...irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and that for aspiring fiction writers they pose especially terrible problems.”

Did Mamdani steal this line?: “U.S. pop culture is just like U.S. serious culture in that its central tension has always set the *nobility of individualism against the warmth of communal belonging.*”

“Show after shoe, for years now, has been either a self-acknowledged blank, visual, postmodern allusion- and attitude-fest, or, even more common, an uneven battle of wits between some ineffectual spokesman for hollow authority and his precocious children, mordant spouse, or sardonic colleagues.”

“As essayist Lewis Hyde points out, self-mocking irony is always ‘sincerity, with a motive.’”

“In the same regard, see that in 1990, flatness, numbness, and cynicism in one’s demeanor are clear ways to transmit the televisual attitude of stand-out-transcendence—flatness and numbness transcend sentimentality, and cynicism announces that one knows the score, was last naïve about something at maybe like age four.”

“How can even the idea of rebellion against corporate culture stay meaningful when Chrysler Inc. advertises trucks by invoking ‘The Dodge Rebellion’? How is one to be a bona fide iconoclast when Burger King sells onion rings with ‘Sometimes You Gotta Break The Rules’?”

Derivative Sport In Tornado Alley

“But to say that I did not use verve or imagination was untrue. Acceptance is its own verve, and it takes imagination for a player to like wind...”

Getting Away From Already Pretty Much Being Away From It All

“Why exactly a swanky East-Coast magazine is interest in the Illinois State Fair remains unclear to me. I suspect that every so often editors at these magazines slap their foreheads and remember that about 90% of the United States lies between the Coasts and figure they’ll engage somebody to do pith-helmeted anthropological reporting on something rural and heartlandish”

“Maybe what I really miss now is the fact that a child’s radical delusive self-centeredness doesn’t cause him conflict or pain.”

“Midwestern fat people have no compunction about wearing shorts or halter-tops.”

“Whereas on the East Coast, politico-sexual indignation *is* the fun. In New York, a woman who’d been hung upside down and ogled would go get a whole lot of other women together and there’d be this frenzy of politico-sexual indignation. They’d confront the ogler. File an injunction. Management’d find itself litigating expensively—violation of a woman’s right to nonharassed fun. I’m telling you. Personal and political fun merge somewhere just east of Cleveland, for women.’ Native companion kills a mosquito without looking at it. ‘And they all take Prozac and stick their finger down their throat too out there. They might ought to try just climbing on and spinning and ignoring assholes. That’s pretty much all you can do.”

“Thus the urge physically to commune, melt, become part of a crowd. To see something besides land and corn and satellite TV and your wife’s face. Crowds out here are a kind of adult nightlight. Hence the sacredness out here of Spectacle, Public Event. High school football, church social, Little League, parades, Bingo, Market Dat, State Fair. All very big, very deep deals.”

“A squad of eleven-year-olds from Towanda does and involved routine in tribute to Operation Desert Storm. To most of the acts there’s either a cutesy ultrafeminine aspect or a stern butch military one; there’s little in between. Starting with the twelve-year-olds—one team in black spandex that looks like cheesecake leotards—there is, I’m afraid, a frank sexuality that begins to get uncomfortable. You can already see some of the sixteen year olds out under the basketball hoop doing little warm-up twirls and splits, and they’re disturbing enough to make me wish there was a copy of the state’s criminal statutes handy and prominent.”

“One of my basic life goals is to subject my nervous system to as little total terror as possible. The cruel paradox of course is that this kind of makeup usually goes hand in hand with a delicate nervous system that’s extremely easy to terrify.”

A supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again

“I felt despair. The word’s overused and banalified now, despair, but it’s a serious word, and I’m using it seriously.”

“Contrast this coyness with the force of the 7NC brochure’s ads: the near-imperative use of the second person, the specificity of detail that extends even to what you will say (*you will say* “ I couldn’t agree more” and “Let’s do it all!”) In the cruise brochure’s ads, you are excused from doing the work of constructing the fantasy. The ads do it for you.”

“And then now a very strange argument indeed ensues, me v. the Lebanese porter, because it turns out I am putting this guy, who barely speaks English, in a terrible kind of sedulous-service double-bind, a paradox of pampering: viz. the The-Passenger’s-Always-Right-versus-Never-Let-A-Passanger-Carry-His-Own-Bag paradox.”

“The thing to notice is that the real fantasy here isn’t that this promise will be kepy, but that such a promise is keepable at all. This is a big one, this lie.”

“Cynical observations about how appropriate it is that a 7NC Luxury Cruise’s daily worship is held in a n overdecorated bar seem too easy to take up space on. Just how a diocesan priest gets a 7NC Megacruiser as a parish—whether Celebrity maybe has clerics on retainer, sort of like the army, and they get assigned to different ships in rotation, and whether the R.C. Church gets paid just like the other vendors who provide service and entertainment personnel, etc. will I’m afraid be forever unclear.”

“Winston also sometimes seemd to suffer from the verbal delusion that he was an urban black male; I have no idea what the story is on this or what conclusions to draw from it.”

“No one at Table 64 said anything about the absurd informatility of my formal-supper dress, but it was the sort of deeply tense absence of comment which attends only the grossest and most absurd breaches of social convention, and which after the Elegant Tea Time debacle pushed me right to the very edge of ship-jumping.”