On a wealth of self-delusion

In which an economist explains to the rich that they needed luck, Danny Dorling writes

Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy
By Robert K. Frank
Princeton University Press

Robert Frank was a lazy procrastinator by nature. Luckily for him, he had no trust fund and had to work. He was overlooked by his baseball coach, despite his great ability, and became an economist instead. He secured tenure mostly through very good luck. He was also lucky to escape death twice – the first time trapped under water in a windsurfing accident, and the second, suffering cardiac arrest while playing tennis, when he was given only a 2 per cent chance of survival. Had Frank, now in his seventies, not lived long enough to escape the vanity of youth, long enough to contemplate all these chance events, he would have left a very different tale in his wake.

Frank is the most successful popular economist writer in the world. He also procrastinates and loves fun, but when he writes he does not waste time. He wants all of you, but especially those of you who are rich and successful, to understand the tailwinds that got you to where you are, and your luck and celebrations for special events, and if their mansions and parties were smaller. He ends, “the consensus can flip with surprising speed once good arguments begin to find their footing. And those arguments can only spread once the opposition is at a tone and echo. The other, glass eye – actually it’s Elizabeth Bishop’s grandmother’s – goes “off at an angle”, and takes in poetry’s place. Time, which in many ways is “described in a strange way”. Time, which in Martian poetry is something “tied to the wrist”, might be more kind. For Craig Raine still walks among us, a passionate and brilliant observer, and only sometimes squinting at what he finds here. In binocular mode, Raine’s book keeps one close eye on poems, always asking “what do they mean?”, and guiding us carefully through the thicket of text and echo. The other, glass eye – actually it’s W. S. Merwin’s finger – has been altered, alters all”. Diverting, entertaining and especially eccentric; like William Blake’s The Enlarged Traveller, they show how “the eye altering, alters all”. Diverting, because diverted. Yet, when squinting at academic “nursery notions”, even Raine’s glass eye can fog with frustration. Robert Frost overpowers his interpretations by demanding: “put a sign up close-to-to all but this”, in this book’s passion against misreading greater than its passion for poems? D.H. Lawrence and F Scott Fitzgerald; ravens and crows in Milton, Ernest Hemingway, Shakespeare and Ted Hughes. Yet, after his poem Gattuck endured a trial by Twitter for depicting the “two foot span” of a lady’s “behind really shaped like wheelbarrows? Is Bob Dylan really the father of rap? (cf. The Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron?) Shouldn’t W. B. Yeats’ Byzantium be interpreted in terms of his earlier poem (cf. Sailing to Byzantium)?