

## **The Apotheosis of Bernie Madoff**

Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme endured for about twenty-five years, an unusual length of time for a fraud that everyone knows will ultimately be discovered. I suppose that many of these scammers believe that they will know when the jig is up, and they will have time to cash out and disappear. But not Bernie: Sometime during his long run he came to believe that he had outsmarted the SEC and its investigators, as well as the many illustrious people whose money he took, \$50 or \$65 billion. It's difficult to know since eight years after his conviction there is still missing money.

Among a number of precautions he took, Madoff generally hired people who were too dumb or too lazy to figure out what he was up to, though there was plenty of reason to be suspicious. He paid his crew good salaries so that they would be uninterested in doing anything that might stop their personal gravy train. Even his private secretary, with him for the entire twenty-five years, claims she saw nothing wrong. She ought to apply to join the SEC investigative unit; she has the highest qualifications—lack of knowledge, initiative, and inquisitiveness. She might even become chief investigator.

I began wondering what effect this long run of success might have had on his view of himself. It is said that he was extremely egotistical, talking to even very bright people like they were morons. Given the background of our Club members as doctors, lawyers, professors, and P and Gers, we all know what that is like from one perspective or the other. The Club provides safe haven for those of us who may actually be morons since no one would be impolite enough to say so in this hallowed hall, even with our Shakespearean motto emblazoned above the stage: "Oh God, here comes another one with a paper." Then the word *God* stuck in my mind. Bernie felt himself to be in that narrow category; he

announced on his blog that he had become divine. Not many mortals come to claim divinity but such a condition has not been unknown in history.

I decided that I would query Madoff on the issue of his alleged godhood by responding to his blog, which he operates from his narrow prison cell in the Butner Medium Correctional Institution, one of a four-plex of Federal prisons located in Butner, North Carolina, twenty-five miles northwest of Raleigh. A town of five thousand souls, not many Americans know that Butner is also the moron capital of the United States, beating a host of strong contenders, just edging out the House of Representatives, the second place finisher. John Boehner's surprise defection tipped the scales in Butner's favor. No one knows why the town has earned this distinction but the cause may be genetic. The town's founders are rumored to have been escapees from a mental institution.

Incidentally, Bernie is not its only illustrious inmate: Jesse Jackson, Jr., convicted of misuse of campaign funds, served a portion of his 2 ½ year sentence there.

Madoff calls his blog, "Bernie's Limited Modified Hang-out," on which he gives his reflections on life in prison and tells some of the truth about his crimes. When not blogging or napping, as a form of penance, he spends most of his time working in the kitchen preparing South Polish cuisine for other Jewish prisoners (and there are many), which they refuse to eat. They say, "Your gefilte fish sucks! It's too sweet." "This matzo ball soup is too salty." "Who fucks up beets?!" And so on.

Bernie surprised me by agreeing to be interviewed through Skype on his laptop. No subject was off limits. Bernie leisurely reclined on the bottom bunk in his cell in his orange jump suit. He still had his magnificent mane of gray hair. But I could not help noticing that he had a black eye, and his right arm was in a sling.

Me: “How are you Bernie? You don’t look so good; what happened?”

Bernie: “I fell out of my bunk a couple of nights ago. I have a black eye, as you can see, broken ribs and a punctured lung.”

Me: “Well, your bunk is less than a foot off the floor. How could that have caused your injuries?”

Bernie: “John, one does not publically discuss certain unpleasant prison events lest they be repeated.”

Me: “Did you get into a fight with another inmate?”

Bernie: “I just said that some things cant be discussed. Let’s just say that some sore losers have been able to reach into the population here to pursue their vendetta against me.”

Me: “So some of your former investors paid an inmate to beat you up, eh?” Then I turned to asking if he knew that he was about to get a cell mate.

Bernie: “Yeah, I have been told I will be sharing this cell with Raj Rajaratnam. I am looking forward to picking his brain about insider trading.”

Me: “But he is a big man. Won’t you be uncomfortable in there with him?”

Bernie: “Yeah. I am a little worried about that but there isn’t much I can do about it.”

I decided to come to the point: “Bernie, you have said that you felt like a god, a man-god like in the past, Alexander the Great or somebody.”

Bernie: “Sure, I did but it wasn’t easy to achieve that status; I had to do some reading first since such status is not part of the Jewish tradition. David and Solomon were outstanding kings but they were not divine.”

Me: “And what reading?”

Bernie: “Well, I soon discovered that the process for becoming a god in most places could not begin until the subject was deceased. It is called “apotheosis.” It began with the Greeks, like everything else. A ceremony was held with the body of the dead king and a life size wax model of him. A formula was spoken and the wax figure melted; the result was to send his spirit winging upwards to join the gods on Olympus. The Romans followed this model, though we all know that there were some small problems when Caesar Augustus demanded to be worshipped as a living god. I was very relieved to see his example; apotheosis would be extremely inconvenient if I had to die first. Then I discovered the example of the Medici grand duke Cosimo I, of late Renaissance Florence. He turned himself into a divine terrestrial monarch while still alive. Those Florentines were always different.”

Me: “So you discovered a form of apotheosis that did not first demand the death of the monarch?”

Bernie: “Yes. I had tried other forms of self-celebration. I had my fill of the usual rewards on Wall Street—cocaine, girls, champagne, tossing midgets--but they left me feeling empty, like I deserved more. After all, I was unique. No one and I mean no one, not my sons or my wife, knew what I was up to. It could be lonely being a man-god: Who could I talk to? I became isolated. The morons around me I had to keep in the dark; but they were so stupid that I began to demonstrate my secret status by talking down to them. After all, being a god, what could mere mortals have to say to you that might be interesting?”

Me: “So what did this ceremony look like? What was your model?”

Bernie: “On one of my trips to Paris I visited the Louvre. I am not very big on museums since I only prefer to view art that is available to be bought. This time however I was struck by Jean-Auguste-

Dominique Ingres' *Apotheosis of Homer*, painted in 1827. Since we don't know who Homer was, or *if* he was, or when he lived exactly, this scene was totally contrived. But I liked it: Gathered around Homer, draped in a toga, seated on a marble throne in front of a classically columned building, were Dante and a number of other famous writers and artists from the ancient and the modern worlds. An angel stands next to him about to place a laurel wreath upon his head, after the fashion of the Italian poet Petrarch, who in the mid fourteenth century, was the first modern writer to receive this Roman acknowledgment of artistic brilliance. Homer is depicted as white, which does not bother me; however, some African American scholars claim that Homer was actually African. Like I said, we will never know who he really was."

Me: "I had not heard that Afro-centrists were claiming Homer now."

Bernie: "Well, that is what some of Butner's blacks argue. They say he was actually Egyptian, and that his epic poems were based on popular stories from the Nile delta."

Me: "I see that race is no impediment to being a moron."

Bernie: "The purpose of the painting is to place Homer above all other artistic competitors through the ages. This is a purpose that seems to fit me."

Me: "So were you seated upon a marble throne during your ceremony?"

Bernie: "No. The only marble around in the "Lipstick Building" is in the bathrooms. But speaking of marble thrones, a German bank in Berlin had the bathrooms in their new skyscraper headquarters built on the top floors so they might enjoy the fantasy of shitting on their competitors in buildings below them. This is absolutely true; I read it in Michael Lewis."

Me: "Yeah, I heard that too. But back to your ceremony."

Bernie: "It happened in my office. I got myself a white bed sheet to wrap around myself as a toga. I stood barefoot on top of my desk with the lights off. My secretary lit some candles and some Jasmine incense to create the right mood. I am told that the spirits are especially fond of Jasmine. I had a local flower shop make the laurel wreath; my wife served as the angel who places the wreath upon my head."

Me: "Pretty rag-tag group. No Dantes or Michelangelos."

Bernie: "You can understand why I did not want a lot of outsiders involved. There were none of my Wall Street colleagues, either. I also had the wax figurine of myself, considerably smaller than life size. We lit it, and it quickly dissolved. We then played a cd of 'Thus Spake Zarathustra', and I felt my first out of body experience when my consciousness rose to a corner of the ceiling, the northwest corner to be specific."

Me: "Wow that must have been phenomenal!"

Bernie: "Well, I was expecting to ascend somewhat higher, into the cosmos you know. I wasn't sure which gods I would meet but as long as I was there..."

Me: "Yeah. Some things are out of your control."

Bernie: "When I returned to my body, I felt like only a minor god but a god is a god; I felt good enough to keep avoiding the SEC. On the other hand, there was the FBI that was also investigating me. When the FBI agents come to me, I had no choice but to confess. I knew they had the goods. I had confessed to my two sons the previous evening."

Me: "So you became a god and got busted right away? What a downer."

Bernie: “Yeah but for twenty-five years I had it all. I lived better than a god. I lived like a king, and then I became a god. How many other people can say that?”

Me: “But what about all of the people whose money you squandered? Don’t you feel some shame?”

Bernie: “I am a god. I am beyond shame.”