The Impossible Handshake

*Critique spelled the death of kings.*
—Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, pt. 2: The Self-Image of the Enlightenment Thinkers as a Response to Their Situation within the Absolutist State

*The history of man… is divided between the great nations and the great geniuses, between the kings and the men of letters, between the conquerors and the philosophers.*
—d’Alembert

The division between philosophers and princes, scholars and conquerors, is neither complete nor reparable. So is history written by two hands, with one washing another it would never shake.

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§ **Verblendungszusammenhang**

To insist that knowledge is power and power, knowledge is to forget that power often *falls behind* knowledge, not like a shadowy predator, waiting for the right moment to strike, but like an ogre (the creature, even, of some learned Frankenstein). It is, as well, to forget that knowledge has been known to *run ahead* of power, not like a scout watching for an enemy’s approach, but dreamily, like a dog unleashed in a field, for all intents and purposes a will-less creature just following its nose.

§ **Politics and Truth-Power**

The modern relationship between knowledge and power is fundamentally ambivalent, though knowledge and power, in the abstract, are not (truth is good, power bad). The ambivalence we have in mind can be exemplified by the contrasting positions of Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault. For Habermas, truth can be known, justice be had, and knowledge be legitimate if power is taken out of the equation. For Foucault, abstracting truth from power, which is ubiquitous, is a historical impossibility.

In neither view does power simply equal politics. Politics bestows visibility on the operation of power — though only that part that can be legitimized — and plunges into shadow other, non-obvious forms of power, those that feed into or derive from power’s visible form, but that, owing to their subjects, character, and scale of operations, as well as to political necessity, are hidden from critique and questions of legitimacy. This chiaroscuro structure is essential for democratic politics to emerge in full relief, in that political power acquires legitimacy through the real or apparent apoliticalness of public and private institutions within its purview and de facto control.
Power is not all politics, so much is clear. Each of our activities exists within a pattern of complex and largely invisible power relations as in an electrical field. It is associated, like it or not, with certain networks within that field. It can enter into strong relations with and steer them, navigate them and remain non-partisan, but it can also play one network against another to heighten tensions and lead (without being coded as political) to radical realignments of forms of power.

The charge of political irresponsibility can only be levelled at actions once political issues are traced back to them, in the way an epidemic is traced to one person not having washed their hands. This makes apparent the disconnect between politics and everything else (everything below power’s visibility threshold), legitimizing the political status quo — and, conversely, de-legitimizing it when it is discovered to have manipulated private actions for its own ends. Then and there, the political order can either gain power by bringing on board and politicizing the irresponsibly apolitical, or else lose its credibility, like the puppeteer who reaches down to untangle a string (when this happens no one blames the puppets, only their master, for not knowing how to control them without showing his hands).

It is in such circumstances that the need for more power outside politics is voiced most vehemently. It is, on the face of it, a demand for popular, bottom-up empowerment, without top-down restructuring and financial infusion — but, in fact, a request for the oblique political supervision attached to any government’s pledge of greater operational autonomy to its citizens. In effect, the distinction between political and non-political power on the level of organizations and institutions breaks down, and perhaps the future of democracy is to be read off the fragility of the purported threshold dividing politics from other forms of power, instead of located in its resilience and occasional, preventable permeability.

Let us return, then, to the continued ambivalence — as defined by two towering intellects — concerning the relation between power and knowledge. The first, Habermasian position diminishes the reach of power outside its obvious, political forms and undermotivates the struggle to separate
knowledge from politics inasmuch as the latter increasingly conforms to the model of communicative rationality (as is the norm in science). The second, Foucauldian view exaggerates the reach of power, configuring it as entrenched in the domain of truth, and undermotivates the need to fight its corrosive effects by speaking truth to power. Power speaks the language of knowledge, knowledge, that of power, and rational control is as deleterious as it is enabling.

If these are the extremes, truth (along with real power) is somewhere in the middle: truth and politics are separable, and it is the separation we should focus upon. This, however, is not principally a matter of contesting and boycottting knowledge coopted by politics, of defending truth from political attacks, of exposing knowledge’s political impetus. It has primarily to do with tracing the history of knowledge’s entanglement with politics, their nexus. And previously, knowledge had been theologized, its justification, cognizing God’s plan for us. Only in reductive retrospect does this make it “political” before the so-called “Machiavellian moment”—the dawn of modern, historical politics—and Bacon’s calling a spade a spade (“knowledge is power”). Only through such crude foreshortening does Prometheus anticipate Spartacus, and Spartacus, Lenin. But this also means that the French Revolution merely formalized what had long been under way; pre-metric weights and measures like the King’s Foot had already effectively been politicized centuries earlier, in the late Renaissance—as were the contributions of the first modern grammarians.

Today, and as long as there is still politics and knowledge depends on power and money, it is irresponsible for anyone involved in knowledge-work to ignore its political dimension. Ignorance of the uses of knowledge on the part of its producers and technicians does not free them from ethical-political responsibility. This is not to say that what is not yet political, but can be if it gets into the wrong hands, needs to be preemptively politicized. Responsibility, too, corrupts, allowing politics in through the back door. The attempt to bar Iranian students from nuclear physics courses is a case in point of the absurdity of the preemptive political gaming Americans have become world-famous for.
§ New in States

The latest fashion in nation-states is to elicit polarization. Thus, states are either infinitely *defensible* — seen as benevolent, inspiring patriotism even in non-citizens; or they are tirelessly *attackable* — seen as rogue and authoritarian even by their own citizens.

§ *Sua cuique persona*

Insistence on the political innocence or inviolability of science never sounded more like willful ignorance than it does today. Around the time of the rise of social critique — directed from the first against the existing relations, forms, and means of power that hitch truth to governing authority — and a parallel depoliticization of religious truth, also known as economic secularization, *scientific truth* began forfeiting its neutrality and autonomy from politics. Its political ties replaced those previously linking power to revealed, religious truth. Science’s political aspirations grew apace with its ability to provide industrial applications and discover untapped opportunities for investment. (The very notion of *discovery*, unlike that of *eureka* or *epiphany*, seems to have long been freighted with expectations of political-economic gain.)

Notwithstanding over two centuries of shared interests, even as claims to *scientific objectivity* became more difficult to sustain, scientific research has on the whole tried to conceal or downplay its collusion with political power (posing instead merely as its basis or inspiration). Its reliance on economic resources that only states and transnational corporations could provide is a relatively recent development. Since about the mid-eighteenth century, the scientific and technological order, which had already begun to set itself up as the main purveyor of truth, became the most sought-after ally for politics, first politics from above but later also from
below. The courtship of science by politics and industry continues today wherever taxpayer dollars and private funds are funneled into research.

Technological activism, which grew out of formerly state-controlled computer science and comes in a variety of ideological editions (anarchistic, libertarian, radical-democratic), is the latest, most concerted and potent reaction, long without the right means, to this stitching together of positivist science and the state form.* The regrettable downside of its power of resistance and subversion is its abandonment of public critique, leading to the progressive disarticulation of critique from radical politics. It is a price forced upon it by the platforms on which it acts—and one it is largely willing to pay, given the less-than-clear value of social critique when recently popular critical models no longer seem practically useful. Critique continues to be a “resource,” but it is less and less the politically integrated intellectual practice it once hoped to be. It may be that high-level technical expertise and a mature, coherent critical position are now too much to expect of any one person.

The main source of this misfortune (the separation of critique from radicalism-from-below) is the need for anonymity. It is a rare group that manages to combine a loud and clear critical voice with privacy. The position of Anonymous is remarkable for its militant, barebones message, delivered by a computer voice and accompanied by striking visual montage—as if its appeal rested on steering away from theoretical gibberish, from the mash-up of poetic, auratic, gnomic, and combative statements that are the hallmark of young intellectual radicals like the Invisible Committee, who also flirted with anonymity. Its choice of public image, the Guy Fawkes persona, is to its credit. Its reach far exceeds that of the predigested critical canon, whose academic dissemination, mostly in the form of commentary, testifies to the bankruptcy of its more politically productive ideas. In their place, tech activism puts sabotage and the clandestine, carefully targeted

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strike — more military than proletarian in inspiration. The practice ushers in a new type of anonymous heroism, quite distinct from the physical courage of the anonymous, masked Zapatista fighters. Those activists who decide to go public — to become spokespersons for an underground movement — have a claim to valour as strong as any Spartacus.

The gospel of networked anonymity is having an effect, still small, on how we lead our online lives. Internet hygiene has gone from being a marginal issue, limited to those who for one reason or another wanted their real identity hidden (even if they lacked technical savvy to secure their e-coordinates), to a central public one, via sensitive data transfer, identity-theft protection, and social-media privacy-setting concerns. Those who previously gave no thought to the matter find more and more sympathy for the Good Hacker who watches the watchers and regularly throws a wrench into the gears of their indiscriminate snooping. This makes the job of spreading his gospel much easier, among the young especially — young enough to learn code and how to take care of themselves virtually. The simplified version of his teaching hinges on civil commitment to our online anonymity; mass use of anonymizing encryption masks the anonymous few toiling on our privacy’s behalf, who would otherwise draw the authorities’ attention. If everyone is hiding, the state — which finds hiding suspicious — will have a harder time identifying the real culprits. Our good citizenship will form a protective cloud against invasive and illegal policing. The hackers will have a shield, and we will have our privacy — a win-win situation in a time when states have lost their credibility on that score, so much so that no one concerned about their privacy today would risk hiding in plain sight.

The importance of not losing sight of anonymity as a means rather than an end in itself will be obvious to anyone who still has some faith in law and order. Another danger of fetishizing anonymity is forgetting the value of identity — plain old identity, that not only gets you socially integrated but holds on to your rights. For the crusaders for anonymity, whose names are all over the news, privacy is code for an authentic identity that must remain hidden and unnamed.
Julian Assange’s joshing of his ghost-autobiographer, “People think you’re helping me write my book, but actually I’m helping you write your novel,” points to just such an authentic, ineluctable identity. The real hacker, whose mythic life consists in total commitment to the cause, remains masked to the end. There is a sense of cultivated outsiderdom in all of this, of unfulfilled prophecy, of “this is only the beginning,” of everyday sacrifice, of “we are here only by the grace of fate,” “we are lucky to still be alive”—much of it is probably true. For political activism to be effective in checking state control, ever more complex measures will be needed to guard anonymity. For those in charge of it, anonymity may mean opting out of identities that make political recognition in, and mobility between, states even possible. This too will be only for a brave minority, as state-based politics will be for the pusillanimous many.

The politicization of individual and collective online anonymity goes hand in hand with the radicalization of anonymity in physical struggle. The last century and the present one have been, if nothing else, a global teach-in on how to use bodies as weapons, for and against the state. Public and private anonymity or pseudonymity has long assisted in this, but did not become a matter of safe conduct until the enemy’s crosshairs acquired uncanny precision. Virtual anonymity chosen for anti-state political ends, in the name of those who remain named, ultimately serves to shelter one’s physical body; if bullet-proof, identity-encryption could almost seem not to require renouncing civil rights for universal, human ones. Those who maintain such anonymity realize that, as their virtual risk grows, their physical identity turns into a liability that may need to be sacrificed to reduce the chance of virtual discovery and bodily harm. Physical appearance can lead authorities to the hacker’s identity and needs to be differentiated. Low-tech disguises (including surgery), like forged documents, for the time being linking

us to past political and military deception, are about to be retired by mandatory biometric scanning. Like Zorro’s, the masks of the Zapatistas and Guy Fawkes will reappear only as Halloween costumes. The personae of tomorrow will be high-tech, shading into invisibility and virtual martyrdom, more menacingly sock-puppet- and phantom-like.

§ What Words Could

What’s so funny about the idea of “speaking truth to power”? Each time this hallowed phrase fell, a grin went around the table in a Practical Philosophy colloquium at Germany’s best-known university. This grin, and even soft chuckle — it seemed to express a certain embarrassment. Some, ashamed of simplistic, immature thinking or dreaming of the heroism signified by the phrase, might even have blushed. They recognized it as the thought of those who fought for the abolition of slavery and for free speech — because speech, a tool of empowerment, was denied them. But the present security of these hard-won freedoms meant that it was hard to relate to their earnestness, even if sympathy for their struggle was automatic. The phrase, then, evoked the heady milestones in human emancipation, when the power of mere words was a matter of fact, and no light matter. But it failed, at this historical distance, to resonate (in fact, it seemed jarring in the context of a high-level discussion).

Could it be it was just too idealistic — too idealistic back then and now even more so? Could it be such idealism was not only naïve but unnecessary and somehow uncool? If it were necessary and warranted, and the history to which it was attached accorded respect, would it trigger amusement? Perhaps their amusement, this germ of a judgment, says less about the students’ assessment of the old days, and more about their skepticism of political action. Is it their realism or their cynicism that showed through? And then, was it the
whole expression that amused them, or only the “truth” part, or the part about “speaking” out against lies and injustices? Surely it could not have been the third part, “power.” Power, after all, is a serious thing. The daily struggle for it cannot be denied, its abuse, wished away. Many of its particular forms provoke mockery—even the most menacing ones, which multiple strategies might be needed to check and curtail. (This mockery is compatible with speaking the truth only indirectly, as when it aims to expose power’s lies; speaking this truth to power effectively, so that it is registered as such, requires seriousness.) But no one thinks for a minute of power per se as “mere” power, given its potential for the destruction or improvement of lives, the fears and hopes associated with it, and the moral obligation it is assigned. This requires that everyone keep a straight face also when speaking about power. And when reckoning with power or speaking to it. And when speaking the truth, and defending it when necessary, through speech and action. How is it that, after such an anatomy and Socratic assent to the premises, the complete idea of “speaking truth to power” might still seem a tad silly, or not entirely serious, in the end? Does it not correspond to the idea of authentic political engagement among the young? Maybe the simpler answer is right: that such political engagement does not jibe with their idea of themselves.

§ Privacy Settings

When reason goes private, the intellect goes missing.
§ Snowdown

Not even the illusionists of the spiritual realize the extent of human gullibility. Uri Geller’s failure to deliver on the Johnny Carson Show only strengthened belief in his paranormal powers; the public reasoned that “If he were performing magic tricks, they surely would work every time.” The same counterintuitive logic applies to the state’s surveillance capabilities: to an unusually trusting—or mistrustful—public it seems that, if surveillance was indeed as patchy and limited as some would have us believe, it would work without a hitch and be perfectly hidden. But its outrageous failures, of which the Snowden revelations are an example, serve as proof of the boundless scope and ambition of the operation. Those surprised by Snowden’s exposé (and either incredulous about power’s real extent or credulous about its showy self-denial) don’t know the half of it. In this way, all-too-human shadowing and snooping morphs in some minds into quasi-divine omniscience. The only thing that stops us from calling such uncanny worldwide surveillance “miraculous” is the sneaking suspicion that it is up to no good. The sober thought that just because we believe it doesn’t mean it’s happening tips over into paranoid comedy—just because we believe it doesn’t mean it ain’t real—reaffirming our subordination to the perverse logic of state control: the less verifiable, the more onerous. The most farfetched notions—including the conspiracy theories typical of modern liberal democracies—barely scratch the surface of the nefarious reality instituted for the sake of maintaining civic order.

The real post-Snowden showdown will have to wait until the end of the disagreement between believers and disbelievers. The latter, it must be said, are already in the minority. But the former’s easy victory over the surveillance state may come on account not of their numbers but of their strength of belief—having grossly overestimated the power of their enemy.

Noisemakers

*Whistleblowing is music to my ears.*

—anon.

America possesses an endlessly renewable wealth of public hecklers but a dearth of whistleblowers. The difference between heckling and blowing into a whistle is that in the one you are tooting your own horn while in the other you are sounding a general alarm—and waiting for sirens . . .

Sleeper Cells

Little did the wasps know when in autumn they built their nest between the window and the shutter of a locked-up summer cottage that their main load-bearing wall was see-through, leaving them exposed from the inside to the bug-eyed curiosity of next year’s vacationers. In seeking a citizen’s privacy and protection between four walls, we are like the wasps, not realizing the contiguity and meanness of material through which their life will inevitably become known to those who neighbour them. The illusion that a scrap of privacy is our shelter and escape when planning something awful is one for which we will pay in due course. When the neighbours tune in, when nature awakes, when a searchlight falls on our activity, the transparent wall to which we are attached spills our dirty secrets.
§ Private the New Public

*Privacy is the new fame.*

—Nico Sell

So much thinking goes into curating the public view of one’s privacy, where one’s opinions are semi-public or edited for potentially damaging content. So much public opinion goes into evaluating one’s image and commenting off-hand on opinions to which one is not obviously committed. So if one asks “Where has public discourse gone?” one clearly has not been paying attention.

§ Letting It All Hang Out

When true privacy comes to mean public anonymity, we know we are in trouble. Either that, or—particularly if we rule this “true privacy” extreme and exceptional—we have finally overcome the great delusion of modern life that the private and the public spheres should be kept separate. To be sure, we can put up a good fight in defence against our newfound public privacy’s colonization by our professional life, but only when we are taken to task for something we post or say, usually by an employer with whom we are not identifiable. Otherwise, though, we are untroubled by appearing, in a professional guise, to integrate career with parenting, social obligations, self-development, and homemaking—the latter four dimensions that prior to Facebook remained “private private,” i.e., invisible to the same sets of eyes. Speaking of the pre-digital past, no one was better at this partitioning

than the upper-middle-class male. Housekeeping and parenting were offloaded on women and servants, with children allowed into the workplace of the paterfamilias only as apprentices or to be shown off to the odd visitor, rather than, as in the lower stations, as extra hands or for a lack of affordable childcare. Exemptions to this household order took the form of family outings and church. Social functions were defined by hobbies and family gatherings, which were not to be confused with business deals. Self-development was not pursued as public lifelong learning, but in the private library and through travel. Each of these areas of life was visible to different groups of people, with minimal overlap between them. Accidentally happening on a business partner while on an errand made for not a little awkwardness. Today, with incentives to collect contacts in social media hubs and a feed that covers the “whole me,” this unease about conflating or mixing the private with the professional is of necessity disappearing. With so many eyes following, the entire life package is offered up for judgment. Perhaps this is not so bad.
Naming Contest

Social media can compel users to curate even their behaviour, to alembicate and edit their own speech and displays of emotion, since their public self-control extends into periods of social activity in isolation, covering most waking hours. Perhaps the social media age deserves to be called the Age of the Art of the Person. The long-term effects on users might considerably strengthen their ability to get along in virtual and even physical environments. But such arguments from wishful thinking, which generalize optimistically about the future based on a particular worry about the present, do nothing to diminish the pessimistic counterclaim that spending time on social media, where access to us is comparatively restricted, leads us to mask superficially what we once controlled inwardly, ultimately weakening our ability to check spontaneous reactions in unmediated public situations. And if we stop to think of the scandal, spite, and hatred that anonymity encourages, perhaps a better name for the social media age would be the Age of the Troll.
§ Wanted: Amanuensis

Who doesn’t like to dictate?

§ Dictationship

A tough sentence is just by the time you finish it.

§ Do As You’re Told

Read every word.
§ Intramurale

Both the rich and the poor, the ruling and privileged no less than the exploited and subordinate, are known to hold political ideas contrary to their interests. In the latter group, these ideas earn the name ideology; we are dealing here with false consciousness. In the former group, they are called utopia, which is to say right consciousness. Just as ideology is contrary to the interests of the poor, so utopia is contrary to the interests of the well-to-do.

The interests of members of each group can certainly undergo inversion—that is, perversion from any but their own perspective.

§ Daisy Chains

Chains decked with flowers no longer rattle.

Flowers in chains are as fragrant as ever.

The thorn is the flower’s way of saying beauty can be painful. A rose grasped too carelessly is a dangerous object. Barbed wire is a rose bush depetalled and hardened.
§ Doing Time

To do time is not to use it. It is to be stuck with all the time one needs, and more, and have no way of filling it freely. So much time and too little to do. Being locked up with time and serving it is no occupation. It is not something even an old-timer can become an old hand at. Nothing but time on his hands keeps his hands tied. Time is his punishment. Instead of lashes and beatings he is administered minutes and hours. As long as he has lots of it, time is not on his side.

§ Habeas corpus

No slave should die a natural death. There is a point where caution ends and cowardice begins. For every day I am imprisoned I will refuse both food and water. My hunger is for the Liberation of my people. My thirst is for the ending of oppression.... Our will to live must no longer supercede our will to fight, for our fighting will determine if our race shall live.


The enduring power of Spartacus’s rebellion is its most enduring power; the universality of oppression and resistance to it are secondary. Fast-forward nineteen centuries and the language of freedom for the enslaved is used by men like Frederick Douglass to speak to comparable conditions of captivity. While the tactics of resistance have multiplied, as have the media of its publicization, the physical body

continues to be put on the line in all brave emancipatory action. Its presence, signifying integrity, expresses that shared and ineliminable minimum of human existence, physical need.

We can imagine this will not always be so: that someday (perhaps quite soon, given decades of actual and dystopian foreshadowing) risking flesh and blood, however heroic it still seems to us, will cease to be necessary, and capturing and hurting them alone, have no effect. The incarceration and torture of the body have always failed to *chain* the mind to it. But the artificially augmented mind is newly vulnerable. Disarming the body by throwing it into prison was always second-best to mind control and brainwashing, which not only leaves the body intact but, as in *The Manchurian Candidate*, renders it cooperative and operational. Human bondage may soon seem no less a relic than the binding of feet. We can look forward to a grey future in which bodies will be locked up by minds locked away in real virtual prisons . . .

‡ A Tale of Two Bodies

Two ways for the body of the near future: fit and enslaved, or enslaved and broken. Either way: pumped full of drugs, plugged into some underserved, overexploited circuit in the network.
White on Black

Our recognition of the value of other lives, including those recognized by science as human, forms a kind of spectrum, on which the difference between animals and humans is not clearly marked, poisoning for the longest time interracial relations. The events in Ferguson, Mo., ask for an even less optimistic interpretation than that offered as a corrective to the “unduly optimistic” perspective that understands white police officers’ actions in terms, not even of de-humanizing blacks, but of a pervasive blindness to their humanity. The basis of this latter, humanist position is the “psychologically dubious assumption . . . that when people who have historically enjoyed a dominant position in society (in this case white men) come to recognize historically subordinated people (racial minorities, women) as their moral and social equals, they will welcome the newcomers.”* The black people whose protest slogan read “In Seeing Our HUMANITY You Will Find Your OWN (#blacklivesmatter)” clearly endorsed this line of thinking.†

The corrective, critical line on the humanist view finds support in the whites’ punitive resentment, so clearly in evidence. The thesis here is that what fuels white rage and inspires (instead of follows from) black dehumanization is the threat blacks pose to the social hierarchy. There is much truth in this, of course, especially when considered alongside the motivation for lynchings. The threat of usurpation—sexual, political, economic—of whites’ place in American society by black people was, and no doubt continues to be, perceived as real in many quarters. But precisely by reason of the long and complex history of racism, we must take issue with this as the sole explanation. We must look farther

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back into the past of white on black violence, to the age of slavery. We will then have no trouble seeing that discrimination on the social hierarchy affected only some, select blacks; most fell outside the narrow band of human society on the value-spectrum of lives, and were treated as human only to the extent that they could follow orders and had basic needs for food and shelter (whose denial could then be used to control them). They were human enough to do human work, no more. In what is perhaps an indelible legacy of slavery, this attitude manifests today on the streets of America.

Let’s indulge in a little timely speculation. Perhaps the black people in Ferguson and beyond could get better results by claiming for recognition, not of their common humanity, but of something else. Perhaps in the current climate of hate their time would be better spent, not on appeals to human empathy, but on a cunning détournement of historical reason. The struggle for civil rights for blacks is as old as human rights. But does not the cause of animal rights have the advantage at least of novelty and near-automatic sympathy? Perhaps to protect themselves from being killed they would be well-advised to present themselves as harmless because long-domesticated animals, rather than the ferocious beasts they routinely seem to armed and armoured cops? Or would whites resent them for it even more? For what exactly? For being as some who take aim at them would no doubt like themselves to be — excused from morality and responsibility — and who, at moments of great moral pressure and risk of error, would give anything for a heavy horse’s collar, as one sees now and then fashioned into a mirror frame, to wear around their neck?
Concrete Is Hard

Empathy knows no “hard” or “natural” limits. If another’s shoes prove a good fit, why not go in them beyond the pathos of creatureliness, past weeping the lacrimae rerum, all the way to one’s own destruction, choosing it over empathy’s death?

The only living limits to empathy are distraction, thief of attentive feeling, and judgment, which projects onto empathizers its own ulterior motives. Historically, as soon as a conceptual gulf opened up between social self-construction and biological being, and identity became something one could consciously construct and claim, survival- as much as sympathy- and empathy-based claims of alternate gender or racial belonging, that is to say without obvious correspondence to one’s biology, went from being treated as psychic aberrations to being criticizable on political grounds.

Only when biological makeup is itself thoroughly historicized can such critical indignation, which betokens above all an inability to empathize, be silenced. The conquest of gay and lesbian (and presently transgender) rights notwithstanding, this indignation must persist as long as nature is essentialized, appealed to as decisive and unambiguous.

Where they are made in the abstract, “in the head,” on the level of self-perception, even fundamental switches in identity are readily portrayed as facile. Their particular demands for recognition, if met, fail to bring about legal generalization. Only what is perceived as difficult, no matter how superficial—such as the awkward social expression of new identity, the dramatic alteration of appearance breaking with gender or racial conventions to the point of provoking outright hostility—can hope, in the long run, to produce the desired changes. And when a transformation is so complete that it cannot be seen through, raising no suspicion of “deception,” the existential difficulty of the performance (once revealed, as it sometimes is after the danger has passed) is conceded quickly enough.

But even such rare respect and admiration are not empathy. Renouncing one’s “natural” identity, trading it for another, is
taken either for a betrayal or, less often, for a sacrifice, this even when the change improves one's social standing. In a brutally patriarchal culture, the Egyptian widow and mother who for decades posed as a father and man, or the girls in certain areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan who live *bacha posh*, as boys, blurring the lines between fact and fiction, are all forgiven. To Western eyes, their repudiated femininity appears in a heroic light (a phenomenon for which the French nation even has a pious icon in the Maid of Orléans).

In a residually misogynistic culture, where women have made great strides towards achieving parity, the high-profile cases of Bradley-cum-Chelsea Manning or Bruce-cum-Caitlyn Jenner receive less sympathy than pity (their sacrifices were not obviously beneficial) or indulgence (though biology doesn't lie, it can be fooled). Public reaction on the spectrum of political correctness ranges in such cases from sisterly embrace through the recognition of courage to a shrug to the curiosity accorded to freaks. Femininity was never so alienated as to be, when claimed by a man, contested and condemned for having been claimed *falsely*; from the female point of view, the man-to-woman switch may be redeemed as much by “being oneself” as by the trans person's appreciation or empathy for the secondary sex, an impulse to be commended even when its expression is not.

Yet the white woman who for many years chose to identify as black for no doubt complex reasons, in which empathy with the discriminated against must have had a share (alongside factors like family upbringing and ancestry, gender and environment) — such a woman is judged mercilessly as a self-serving fraud. Increasingly, politicized suffering refuses to be appropriated, particularly by those who had not suffered. There is no special treatment for impostors, no matter how genuine their empathy and devotion to sharing the fate of the oppressed. As long as the victims of suffering remain disempowered, they deserve at least to own all their pain as they own debt or their many other negative attributes. The happy and the spared, meanwhile, worry where such crossovers, were they to become numerous enough, might lead all those conscious of inequality without being themselves hard
hit. Any such polarization, with activists and intellectuals on the “wrong side,” could spell the end of “natural advantage.” In this way an extreme manifestation of white-black empathy finds itself doubly condemned.

Those who want to change their life concretely and significantly by identifying in their mind and appearance with the long-dominated who have become politically conscious of their subjugation face a dilemma: identity self-reassignment entails the possibility of being publically outed and condemned. These are the hard-fact disincentives to the new identity’s full concretion. These also are the hindrances to mobilization in solidarity — be it from a distance or via active transversality — against those who have the greatest stakes in maintaining an unjust status quo, where biological knowledge hopelessly stuck in three dimensions is the arbiter of fate.

In a remarkable short story by the neo-abolitionist anthropologist Holley Cantine, the surviving Plains Indians live up to their romanticized image and the reputation for cold-blooded savagery that follows it, in a bid to return America to something like its pre-conquest state. Recognizing an opportunity in their summons to save the flagging U.S. tourism industry (and later on, taking advantage of “white” greed); recognizing, too, the strategic value of converts to their way of life (if anything, underestimating the zeal of these would-be indigenes), they train an army of warriors and together take over the country. At first it feels to them like an elaborate costume drama, but within a few years, having become “naturals” at it, they transform the original economic telos into a political, counter-providential one (“the sacred mission of the Indians”). For everyone and everything involved — the natives, the kids running away from consumer society in pursuit of adventure and out of sympathy for the underdog’s “general rising,” not to mention the well-meaning tribal ethnologists and nature itself, the animals and the land — for all except committed “whites,”

whatever their skin colour, the ensuing civil war represents a second chance no one prevents them from taking.

In real life, such stories do not always end well. Regardless of the strength of self-interest, all seems to hang on the breadth and depth of mutual empathy. Article 14 of the 1805 Constitution of Haiti stated: “All acceptation of colour among the children of one and the same family, of whom the chief magistrate is the father, being necessarily to cease, the Haytians shall hence forward be known only by the generic appellation of Blacks.” The inclusivity of that appellation has perhaps never been more generous.

But even those real-life cases that do end well do not always end good. Far-reaching empathy is necessarily selective, but not automatically right. In the eyes of global public opinion makers, global jihadism is a pandemic. But where the possible self-interested advantages of empathy outweigh concerns over the authenticity of identity, a battle, be it good or evil, is already half won.
§ Torn-Country Experts

draft 1:

The perspective of the native informant is too restricted, too biased to give us knowledge. Its bias confirms what we already know.

draft 2:

The perspective of the native informant is too restricted, too biased to give us knowledge. Its bias is the knowledge we want confirmed.

§ Two-Way Terror

A modern nightmare-fantasy: to wind up in solitary at a black site. It is a simple inversion of a modern fantasy-nightmare: to be blindfolded and flown half-way around the world and dumped in a desert wilderness. Common to both renderings is sensory day-for-night disorientation and impotence, in the first case dreaded, in the second desired.
Uncanny Valentines

In a culture as enervated as the Western one, pleasure cannot be derived from forestalled threats any more than excitement comes from civilizational anxiety or terror. But when the French “Charlies” gathered together and defiant, they marched united and proud: the nose-count demonstrated they were many — there had never been so large a public rally in France! Who could deny that from this solidarity flowed a kind of sovereign joy?

If Michel Houellebecq, author of the novel Submission, does “do Ramadan in 2022,” it will be out of boredom, expediency, or intimidation. If ISIS has its way in the East and Europe submits to its Muslims, their countdown to the End of Times will not, like New Year’s Eve, do it for everyone. But apocalypticism continues to have a morbid, minority appeal in the spiritual West. The more mixed, crowded and explosive the world becomes, the more “open” civil society will be to citizens who root for its enemies and attackers. Their hearts will swell at the thought of faraway dramas and faiths, uncompromising and righteous causes. They will beat the rhythm of crude romanticism counter to calculation, of old asceticism contrary to distraction, of communal sacrifice against individual life and satisfaction. The souls of these not-quite-defectors will cheer secretly, but cheer nonetheless — and leap in anticipation of either sounding the alarm at home or joining secret comrades on distant soil.

Apocalyptic Anti-Apocalypticism

Nanterre, France, 2016: “Another end of the world is possible.”
Allegory of Politics

In simple terms that might yet speak to those who would like to see the body put back in political action, politics is society’s dance with conflict, that is to say an art form. Either side can take the lead. Leading and being led are the basal modes of society’s political dynamic. The tendency to reduce this dynamic to power relations must be acknowledged for what it is: a minatory attempt to take the art out of politics so as to perpetuate the illusion of the rationalizability and finally the automatizability of political life. It must therefore be resisted. At least on the left, based on a dear but caricatural distinction between twentieth-century ideological extremes, resistance takes the form of producing political art through alliances among artists and activists. The same cannot be said of today’s right—unless by “art of politics” we mean merely the kind of smoke-and-mirror campaigns that the moderate political spectrum officially condemns.

To return to the metaphor of the dance, if society reins in conflict by the elegant, stately movements of a polonaise (sometimes phlegmatic, sometimes energetic), conflict compels it to a sprightly polka that at times quite resembles jumping on hot coals. We can picture war as conflict sweeping up society in a feral whirl, furious and disorienting. When the pair does come to a stop, society is still reeling, and needs a few moments to recover its balance. If society takes the lead again, it suffers much criticism for letting itself get mixed up in a tarantistic frenzy, allowing “the blind to lead the blind,” etc.

Through the many styles and moves that conflict takes it, or that it takes conflict, each society must always keep up with conflict; were it to trip, it would be trampled and defeated in the tournament by competitors for first place.
§ “Murderous Alphabet”

Where the world is run by hunger, words grow dull—but syllables, murderous. Stripped to the bone and whetted, language is sharp as a butcher’s knife where there is plenty of meat to go around. Hunger makes language do the killing in the name of ending it.

§ Friendly Fire

_Boss, this is a roast._

—reportedly said of a deadly fire in New York City

_It became necessary to destroy the town to save it._

—reportedly said of one Vietnamese town by an unnamed U.S. officer following the Tet Offensive

bug splat: _name for a drone casualty on the ground_

The desensitization of police and soldiers in combat zones to the sight of human calamity manifests most not in offensive language and fatuous jokes, in which sexism and racism are at ease, but in absent-minded dark humour.
§ *Rarae aves*

Long before the Civil War era, there were common folk, white and black, who spoke as they wrote and whose written style was uncommonly refined and effortless. Unexpected, they astonished. If we believe westerns, most people communicated by nods and grunts, curtsies and tobacco spit. Illiteracy was common, and on those who learned to read the influence of printed matter was akin to being touched by an angel—so elevated did their diction become, so clear and inspired their thinking and writing. How much truer was this of blacks before the Emancipation Proclamation. One need only think of slave-born poetess Phyllis Wheatley and writer/orator Frederick Douglass to see it as a miraculous occurrence. With the steady rise in mass literacy, such unearthly refinement soon dropped in value as a source of envy or mark of distinction. It not only stood out less; its vanishing was foreordained. The ability to write well is now taken for granted by the educated (just as taste, which can be bought, is assumed to follow wealth). As a result, ever less effort is expended to prove it—as ever less effort is made to ensure that such miracles occur again.
The Seeing Eye

The oldest American guide dog academy, from which the “seeing-eye dog” took its name, was established in 1929 on the model of similar schools founded in Germany to assist handicapped war veterans. This was just a few years after the founding of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt, after which the school of Critical Theory, the “Frankfurt School,” has come to be known. (This institution, too, had an American equivalent, the New School for Social Research in New York, which preceded it, set up on another German model in 1919.) The thinkers associated with Critical Theory, then as now, acquired a reputation for philosophical profundity, acute awareness of social injustice, and a wide-ranging critique of ideology, full of oracular warnings and admonitions. What they have dubbed the culture industry is pointless and visionless. The goal of the Institute is to train those who can see through it, and see us through it, to social change and a better use of reason. Where would we, blind, be without their help? The answer is: not only lost but imperiled without knowing it.

We approach the street corner (our cane broken, our ears clogged) and pause on the curb, mere steps from the flow of traffic. This, then, is the moment of the seeing-eye dog.”

* Full credit for the extended metaphor only paraphrased here goes to Arnd Pollmann.
The Seven Years’ War Again

Usurping the place of high theory (a North American invention) is low theory and cultural studies. When done well, cultural studies works to bring theory to practice. When done badly, it is little more than a theory mash-up—a free-for-all, rootless, abstracted “theory in general.”

Its power as a backlash against the cultured (read: elitist) nature of high theory cannot be denied. Cultural studies came via Britain to the shores of North America, and squared off against French high theory imported there. The Seven Years’ War all over again!

Origin of Revolution

Every revolution was first a thought in one man’s mind.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson*

No revolution was first thought alone. (Even if eventually it wound up that way.)

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* Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History,” in Essays, First Series (1841; New York: John B. Alden, 1890), 36.
Free Radicals

Radicals *uproot*; they know how deep the roots go. Often, caught in the act, they leave some roots behind. The roots regroup. The weeds come back.

Nothing Doing

The history of the word *act* is Southern, Latin; that of *deed*, Northern, Germanic. “Acting” comes from “urging,” “setting in motion,” “stirring up”; “doing,” from “placing,” “unloading,” “setting down.”

Revolutions are made, never done. And to make them means to act in them.
§ Hope Salve

... to hope, till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates
—Percy Bysshe Shelley*

The Hope Salve so popular nowadays is warm and feels good when applied, without burning through the thick layer of widespread political apathy and stimulating sustainable activism. Its effect, principally soothing, is too dispersed, reliant on nebulous ideas like the magic of contingency, resonance, event—that is, someone else, somewhere else, doing something “real” that greases and sets the wheels of revolution in motion. (As for us, we’ll hop on hopeful only once momentum is gained.)

The real diehards of neoliberal “end-of-history” cant, whose numbers continue to dwindle and who have themselves no need of this mass “salvation,” enjoy the “canopy view” and are justified in thinking Hope a scam, unsafe, a deal for addicts of greener pastures. While the former do not exactly throw money at the latter, watchdogs with no personal use for Hope cannot help benefiting in countless ways from Hope-fanatics’ rising indignation and world-changing itch (which, again, they are not actually scratching). Are not doomsayers who see things spinning out of control already calling for a “War on Hope”? Is not this Hope already targeted with secret weapons?

Meanwhile, hope with a backbone, de facto and dangerous, is the concealed switchblade of hardened activists or edgy newbies. No diehards out there who haven’t at least one dog in that fight of such long standing: the state vs. really-existing radicalism. Far from a drain on politics-as-usual, it calls for mongrel means.

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§ Body Politics

The body, needy and desirous, is a Snow White radicals have kissed awake.

§ #OtherwiseOccupied

There is no room in well-organized camps for the “eroticism of crowds.” Prurience is in the eyes of the beholders. Dwellers in glass houses, believing their privacy to be guaranteed by everyone else’s lack of it, and modelling nothing (no better possible world) as a result—let them cast the first stones!
§ “I’m not crying, I’ve just got some #CUPE3903 in my eye”.

The working classes . . . are the caring classes, and always have been. It is just the incessant demonisation directed at the poor by those who benefit from their caring labour . . . Most of us felt work was best avoided, that is, unless it benefited others. But of work that did, whether it meant building bridges or emptying bedpans, you could be rightly proud. And there was something else we were definitely proud of: that we were the kind of people who took care of each other. That’s what set us apart from the rich who, as far as most of us could make out, could half the time barely bring themselves to care about their own children . . . . There is a reason why the ultimate bourgeois virtue is thrift, and the ultimate working-class virtue is solidarity. Yet this is precisely the rope from which that class is currently suspended . . . . As a result everything is thrown into reverse. Generations of political manipulation have finally turned that sense of solidarity into a scourge. Our caring has been weaponised against us. And so it is likely to remain until the left, which claims to speak for labourers, begins to think seriously and strategically about what most labour actually consists of, and what those who engage in it actually think is virtuous about it.

—David Graeber†

If Graeber is right, then all these beautiful feelings of solidarity and mutual aid are a product of oppression. As there is nothing to be done about the past, we accept it. But for that we embrace the beautiful feelings no less. If they are indeed the rope from which we are to be suspended, then let us hang onto it for dear life.

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* Tina Boutis, tweet, Mar. 9, 2015, https://twitter.com/tboutis/status/575081213582557185. CUPE 3903 is a chapter of the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

§ All Is Not Quiet

So long as men die, liberty will never perish.
—Charlie Chaplin’s final, democratic speech
in *The Great Dictator*

Set aside the solidarity of slumber. Do not wait for death to make you equals. Think instead of the gains you could be making when an enemy is asleep or a tyrant breathes his last. When one side dies or dozes, the other must advance against it. In the absence of natality, fatality serves as a beginning. A modern front does not fall silent until the war is over.

*The Great Dictator*, directed by Charlie Chaplin (1940; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2003), DVD.
§ Arms

Since the handling of arms is a beautiful spectacle, it is delightful to young men.
—Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War*

The bullet-shooting weapon, heavy and shiny, in full working order, is associated with sexual organs in both sexes. The beauty of such objects derives from anticipated or real tactile pleasure, since handling them approximates pre-coital rituals meant to heighten eventual discharge. As long as there are shooting ranges, animals to poach, people to ravish, and no wars to fight in, the bearers of guns will find delight in handling arms unmarred by their chief purpose. By such primitive aesthetic pleasure murderousness is truncated, yet its roots continue to grow. The link to hunting and sharp-shooting nearly guarantees this. For the same reason, when the occasion arises for the weapon to be put to its proper use, with desire rerouted along its “natural” path of life-and-death power over other people, the pleasurable associations are slow to dissolve, and sometimes never do. The stamina of a senior serviceman taking aim both surprises and impresses. During peacetime, in turn, the experiential tie of weapons to murderousness affects sensual pleasure, as ejaculation and orgasm mimic the violent discharge of a gun, and the handling of arms by the veteran recalls to him the cold corpse of his comrade. The minds of those whom we task with murder on our behalf have swung from one to the other extreme of acceptable social behaviour—from mandated killing to sexual gratification. Charges of sadism in war and peacetime depend on a mechanistic notion of body and mind, as if our parts could be divvied up between tasks and memory neatly partitioned. In fact, the compartmentalization of sensory memories of physical violence and carnal pleasure expected of us is much too crude and limited to bear such charges out.

§ Last Man Dying

Just why the effort to open a Taliban office has faltered is a matter of dispute. The Americans say the Taliban have simply decided to continue fighting, worried by pressure from their own hard-liners and concerned that entering peace talks would sap their will on the battlefield. “No one wants to be the last one to die before peace talks start,” as one diplomat put it.

—Rod Nordland

Those who die at the end of a long conflict are always the most pitied of casualties, and this not only because they were so close to seeing peace. Their death falls on the cusp of that long-awaited time when sacrifices finally bear fruit, but the turning point in the struggle is backdated. That is why they are said to have “died for nothing,” unnecessarily. The urge to keep fighting must come not just from habit and mistrust of information, but from a fear of dying “needlessly.”

§ Customary Hail of Arrows

If there is one pernicious stereotype that has clung to indigenous people, it is their blind hostility. This, in combination with their unfortunate naiveté about modern power and their tendency towards substance abuse, spells nothing as much as oblivion — indeed, a devotion to it. Ever since the white man arrived with no good intentions, encouraged by papal Discovery Bulls, royal warrants, or simply his own enterprising greed, his behaviour provoked what he wanted

confirmed, regardless of whether he met with native hospitality, suspicion, or indifference. Indigenous peoples were enslavable—though they did merit the status of opponent despite their ignorance of the European art of war—and the land on which they roamed but which was not theirs properly speaking was eventually wrested out from under them. Now that they are no longer subjugated and their possessions are being returned to them, the stereotype of native stupidity seems also to be on its way out. Primitive societies, on which modern European civilization has trained its self-concept, have largely been absorbed and elevated by their modern models—the (selective) return to traditional lifeways can be marshalled as proof.

Yet the stereotypical image lives on, fed by exceptions: the so-called uncontacted tribes that can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Progress in accepting otherness depends in the last analysis on the others’ getting with our progressive program. The savages, objects of much sentimentality in the case of eighteenth-century philosophers and early anthropologists, show themselves (when caught on camera from ship or helicopter) as radically because civilizational other. They speak not a word of modernity, never mind speaking it unevenly!

It is therefore a blessing that our thinking about wilderness began to shift towards conservation when it did. The last remaining savages’ resemblance to the higher animals or earlier hominids places their interests under our concern for biodiversity. Reports of “Stone Age tribes” defending themselves with the “customary hail of arrows”* ought to be pitched not to anthropologists but to the same audience as wildlife videos of wildebeest stampedes—if it will keep the civilizing process at bay.

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“In search of weapons and allies”

Kindliness towards the last remaining “uncontacted” tribes and civilizational remorse over the victims of modernity are one and the same. The fate of the former is a foregone conclusion when even kindness can prove lethal to them. But the conclusion is easier to accept when the fate of all of us is in jeopardy. In our tardy identification with them we are closing the circle of History. The last surviving aboriginals represent the last survivors, the blinking “last men” of the future.

The tortured sentiment of compassion does nothing, however, to counteract the naked economic interest of “human safaris.” Since the first forbids contact with the object of its concern, it cannot warn or arm the natives against their raiders, nor catch these “tour guides” in the act of corruption.

But there is reason to hope for moral reform, helped, as usual, by policing. Not all tour operators are as heartless. “We do not offer any possibility to see [the Mashco-Piro tribe],” one of them maintains. “It is very dangerous to attempt any contact with them. A simple cold can kill them all. Any attempt to try to contact this people can put you in jail in Peru and Brazil,” he adds matter-of-factly.

Every such operator must know that the thinning of the forests, and thus the exposure of those who live in them, is a curse in disguise. The fate of the “uncontacted” tribes and that of the tourism industry are obviously linked. As civilized barbarians in the shape of loggers and drug traffickers invade, the tribesmen will make contact. Not managing to arm or save themselves, they will either make enemies or drop like flies, reactivating in us that schizophrenic blend of compassion and exploitation otherwise known as modernity.


§ Armed to the Teeth

We will also not pay for dental work resulting from … the hostile action of any armed forces, insurrection or participation in a riot or civil commotion.

—Sun Life Financial health insurance policy, extended plan exclusion

A This tells you which side the insurers are not on.

B Yes, in our society you’ve got to be armed to the teeth.

§ Made with Pride

B The self-made man is still “Made in America.”

A Yes, America still makes those who make themselves.

§ Garden of Creativity

Expectations of creativity have never been so elevated and organized so many waking hours of our lives. Notice what has happened: creativity has replaced simple, vulgar productivity. Insofar as our labour does not consist of mindless, mechanical repetition, we are all creators now, that is to say artists of sorts. The ubiquity of competitive creativity under late capitalism is, we are told, liberally rewarded. More importantly, it is not the soul-destroying work of yesteryear, but the personally fulfilling, self-realizing activity that is well worth hacking your own life to get better at. It is not the
victory of creativity that distinguishes our twenty-first century, but the victory of the creativity industry over creativity. The downside is that everyone interpellated as a subject bears the double burden of competitive initiative and invention. Such doubly creative labour feels less and less like a matter of personal choice, even among the self-employed, the artists of old. It feels less and less like play, to which it is compared. The ludic spaces and sandboxes that pop up in creativity-worshipping workplaces are meant to get creative juices flowing and put the instrumentality of work out of mind. In them, the market becomes Demiurge and revenue, a totem pole, while workers magically transform into lesser deities crafting new forms for a tired universe. Driven to it, even on the universe’s behalf, can we still see creativity (even its artistic variety) as a figure of autonomy and self-realization? A strange migration of normativity and constraint from traditional social codes to allegedly free-for-all creativity has damaged the latter’s claim to spontaneity and freedom. Not that the correlative relaxation of norms and hierarchies isn’t a welcome surprise for those sectors in which creativity was traditionally excluded from all but the very top ranks. With the top now relieved of much of the pressure to innovate, workers new to the job would be forgiven for thinking themselves collaborators freely contributing to the “creative commons” — and (gee-whizz) even getting paid! Until they realize that the fruits of their creative labour, which they can often afford, are appropriated and incorporated into designs and projects they can never hope to afford.
Imagine there’s…

Our time places extreme demands on the imagination. Without it we should think ourselves unfit to carry on. The passe-partout of salvation and survival, imagination is key to adapting to new rules in private and political life, the ever “new realities” foisted on us by the breathless motivation and breathtaking ingenuity of capital to create needs, goods, and musts, and ever more urgent futures to match them—rather than let us sleep, having us imagine uses for the still useless. Through our own mental effort are revised not just the rules but also the name of the game. The market appeals to us to *imagine* $x$ (a better world, a better life, better relationships, more rewarding pastimes, alternative selves…) and—as drowsy or lazy as we are—most of the time we do. Every meaningful improvement seems to hang these days on the employment of our imagination as potential consumers of some yet unproduced product. Capital sees the power that slumbers in so many of us and harnesses it before waking it up with the lightest tickle.

And if we struggle a little pulling with us some invisible investor, we don’t recognize it as exploitation and imposition. It is too natural to struggle, there is struggle even in play. Our imagination *self-serving*? We feel duty-bound to contribute *at least most of it* to the common good. We are doing our bit. We are merely giving a leg up to ideas hatching in the minds of visionaries, to creativity that, without our inspired assent, might never see the light of day. We are *research collaborators* who do not require credit, even if it’s our effort to envision them as a part of our life that imagines them into being.
§ Bromides

The rich and the poor are the most creative, the first because they have the luxury to, the second because they need to. The first need purpose and meaning, the second improvise to save their necks.

Bromides, bromides! Without the *middling* classes to take them to task, bring them to account, and draw out the best in them, they would give us, respectively, “art without ends” (the rich) and “art without means” (the poor).

§ So-So

“A middle rank is much more favourable to talent, so we find all great artists and poets in the middle classes.”* Though Goethe had in mind social rank, his remark can apply *mutatis mutandis* also to sales rank. Unfortunately the argument would be hard to make with the metrics in use today.

**Hold on, you mean our data analysis fails to bear out something so self-evident?** The *middle rank* tries less to please and conform, suspicious and disdainful of others’ ability to rise. Its outsized ambition, more acutely felt and self-sustaining the more it accepts its divergence from mass appeal, pushes it to try new things. To survive and live up to its own expectations, “mediocrity’s” ambition reorients itself towards transcendent merit, the standard of transcendence towards some absolute pantheon or heaven, and, crucially, away from temporary “success.” (This it has in common with the disposition that already canonized living writers have to their life’s work, as they look back to measure themselves by nothing as petty as

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* Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann*, 89.
the judgment of their contemporaries.) Aren’t that ambition, perseverance, aloofness from fashion, and indifference to the market, of which principally the mid-list or unpublished writer is still capable, precisely what gives us—and eventually counts as—“originality” and “authenticity”?

A I won’t mock your hope, with which I sympathize without quite being able to identify. The mid-list is now synonymous with mediocrity (no scare quotes here) and greatness measured by popularity. It pains me to think that “originality,” annexed by vapid “greatness,” is also being indexed to sales figures. To turn the trend around, this way of thinking would have to change: there’s a lot to be said for a work making up for its unimpressive sales with its origin, its coming from precisely where originality is not expected—if not the middling social stratum, then let it be the stratum of mediocre sales! But good luck trying to convince those who want to see greatness only where the money collects, and who would ride on greenback all the way to real mediocrity—their happy end.
Night Watch

Sleeping one’s fill, as physical regeneration and cognitive housekeeping, is a luxury that even the rich, let alone those following suit, cannot afford. Lack of sleep is one of the few things they have in common with the poor. When they do close their eyes, neither expect the law to watch over them, only some good angel to keep away illness and bad dreams, or some personal god of discipline to keep them from sleeping in.

Peace and quiet, indoor voices, “bedtime,” and community watch are the middle-class answers to these to-be-avoided extremes. With children in the picture, the substance of household communication is reduced to the essential while its volume, continually adjusted lest it get out of hand. The product of multiple renunciations of immoderation and of bourgeois power, the middle class aspires to the calm atmosphere of the apothecary and the church, to their neighbourly whisper and the confessional undertone. The home office rivals the parlour in sleepiness, of which the cushioned bedroom is the epitome.
§ Nostalgia for the Middle Class

For some time now, *digging* has far exceeded building castles in the air. Dugouts, like catacombs, have a history of being popular and overcrowded; castles, more spacious, of being deserted. It might seem to a stranger that we have invented these extremes to make the *juste milieu* the clear favourite. Being desirable, however, it is no longer obtainable, at least for most; the queue is very long for something in so very short supply (soon nothing in America will be as out of stock as moderation). We are lining up for the sweet spot where felt lack becomes creative again. We are doing so from both sides—both extremes—but it is in the middle, like the noses of the Lady and the Tramp, that our interests meet.

§ If the Shoes Fits

Photographs are for the poor what paintings were for the rich: proofs of their existence.

§ Mutual Parodies

If it is as Dada thought, that the history of art is a parody of the history of politics, surely the history of politics is also a parody of the history of art—particularly literature, as others have astutely observed. As long as this mutually parodic relation is dominant, both art and politics are safe from barbarism. But just as barbaric art has a place in museums, so barbaric politics has a place in history.
The Gulf of Inattention

In the bourgeois age, an independent merchant would show some generosity to every beggar who crossed his path—but in these busy, tangled times good men have become just as unimaginable as truly evil ones.

—Adorno*

It is a comforting thought that the extremes of good and evil as we knew them are a thing of the past, that in our attention-deficit economy good and evil are losing their edge, growing closer together. But this thought is revealed as wishful once we see that the extremes of wealth and poverty, which stand in for them, are moving ever farther apart.

No one takes pride in being a no-goodnik, only in the attendant indignation and rage. These days, pride comes also from demanding generosity of the affluent—rather than, as mere decades ago, as something taken in one’s work, or in holding out for the modest pickings of power and access to resources. We do not count on the goodness of those who can help us; we just demand that they hand over their goods. Our claims have intensified to exert pressure on those who might otherwise evade discharging their duty to society at a time when noblesse no longer obliges. The atmosphere has changed so much that greed is now subject to journalistic shaming, publically pilloried as a social sin, whose punishment will come from the righteous future, where our revendications will be vindicated. No mobbing, no meek praying for a good turn; just straight-up political theology.

§ Clay Pigeon

Why have we been duped into thinking the bourgeois individual subject a mere narrative effect, with the narrative taken at face value? Because on the level of interpersonal experience, that’s all we have to go on. The grand narratives told by that narrative are a different story. Those we can pick apart and inspect, as though they came from an individual.

§ Lying in State

It is alright to lie in public. Those who are genuinely interested can easily find out our truth from states, the truth of who we really are. Why should it matter that it comes not from the horse’s mouth?

And since we are not taken at face value anyway (assuming we show a face and it has value), why deny ourselves the fun of open dissimulation only to end up misunderstood? As long as there is this general understanding, and no one gets held to account for what is on record without being “looked into” first, showing our true face will only add to the general confusion.
§ Up the Ladder to the Roof

For those fed up with the stuffed confines and stuffy routines of flats, the rooftop — stomping ground of thieves and feral cats — will always hold the promise of adventure. They are the souls who will not be kept down, who could have flown balloons, braved alpine peaks, joined the circus, or run away from home. A roof over their head is only ever as desirable as the view from it. And so they endeavour to climb alone to the very top — perhaps only socially, but still — until they have broken through the seal securing the exit hatch against those who have no business there. We who assist them in this transgression can only look up in amazement as we give them a leg up. And though one rarely notices them from the street below, they themselves seem the most amazed of all — not so much at the quality of air or the clouds now less out of reach, but at their own persistence, their ability to stand up to their full height, quite right to feel as though they owned the place.
Holes in a Wall

The Casbah to be saved, as is the mandate of the association “Sauvons la Casbah,” is still the one in Pontecorvo’s 1965 *Battle of Algiers*. The decay of ruins proved slow here, so that the historical setting can be entered like a stage-set to this day. The original actors are nowhere to be seen, but their descendants cannot be far away; that the eyes that follow one around have since multiplied does not alter the palpable, heavy-lidded wariness at the sight of Western interlopers (for the *tourist* has no place here as a category of visitor). Those who prop the walls, backs bent like of the Casbah’s distinctive timber buttresses, know their distant cousins in the clusters of disaffected Arab youths, almost to a man able-bodied, on the street corners of other port cities like Marseille. The living quarters, when not shot through by light by design, caved-in roofs or other dereliction, are dim and cavernous, the humble lives inside them announced only by the cries of children, animals, and the sound of a smith’s hammer, which fills the air with something like music.

Humility Itself

“the parenthesis that is my life”
Excellence Clusters

Germany’s atoning for its genocidal history follows the very Enlightenment principles that, as its sons once argued with great conviction, led by convolute logics and moral meandering to the genocide in the first place. The way to atonement is through the institution of order and merit in the academy. This effort, which other countries have rushed to imitate, begat a formidable new research entity known as the “excellence cluster.”

The model of elite theme-focused research groups or “clusters” housed at different universities shows the German state to be firmly committed to international leadership in the production of knowledge. But as the visiting Indian scholar who would not leave Germany without seeing a KZ (short and informal for “concentration camp”) might have remarked: “You have got to hand it to the Germans: They have these things down to a science. First they ‘cluster’ you. Then they ‘excellence’ you!”
Mottos for Morale

The Latin university motto, that lofty college ideal, betrays the anachronism of its institution and should everywhere be changed to “The future ended here.” The line is an inferior if less equivocal riff on La Sapienza’s “Il futuro è passato qui,” “The future passed here,” “The future passed by here,” “The future here is past.” Will the debt-saddled graduate of Johns Hopkins really be “set free” by truth, as affirmed by the school’s present maxim, “Veritas Vos Liberabit”? Has the University of Missouri fulfilled its mission of “Salus Populi,” making popular welfare the law, at least for its students? Did the graduates of Lesley University, “Perissem Ni Perstitissem,” not let down its alma mater by perishing despite all their persistence? Have the female bachelors of the University of Maryland seen the light of “Fatti Maschii, Parole Femine,” which attributes deeds to men, and to women, mere words?

Feminist Taunt

Wenny, weedy, weekly — I insist!

* The university has dissociated itself from the motto, which remains that of the State of Maryland, albeit in a gentler translation, “Strong deeds, gentle words.”
Let Me See Your Report Card

The dilemma is false: either you stay the course of school and hope for the best, or you drop out and, having briefly landed in the social safety net (the support and dismay of councilors, family and friends), you pass through it, sinking right down to the scummed and stigmatized bottom. The choice between the latter path’s sure nothing and the former’s possible everything is such a no-brainer that it leaves those who make it no illusion of existential freedom. Embarking freely on the path of “illiteracy” is not choosing at all, merely succumbing to wayward environmental pressures. It is not clear how much cultural capital really accrues to those who put themselves through school, but it is obvious that none can come from saying no to it. The very act of opting out nullifies any claim to cultural literacy; with some notable exceptions, it is proof of fundamental, irredeemable foolishness. Neither is homeschooling the Rousseauian or hippie-communist refuge it used to be; the word is code for online learning and long-distance education, when not downright survivalism or fanaticism. So that the choice between two viable alternatives, the formal and the unstructured, is never really permitted, and cannot ultimately be made.
Cliché Alert

cliché: 1825, “electrotype, stereotype,” technical word in printer’s jargon for “stereotype block,” supposedly echoing of the sound of a mold striking molten metal. Figurative extension to “trite phrase, worn-out expression” is first attested in 1888, following the course of stereotype (OED)

The novelist Teju Cole, in a republished series of “letters to a young writer” from his Nigerian days, advises the fledgling: “remove all clichés from your writing. Spare not a single one. The cliché is an element of herd thinking, and writers should be solitary animals” (but writing can also be “lonely,” he later notes, and proposes blogging to alleviate this solitude). The cliché, in any shape or form, is apparently beneath any self-respecting writer.

Rather than point out clichés in the work of those who rail against them, let’s present a counterargument, making better use of the above-quoted lines, which benefit from the doubt we are happy to give to Mr. Cole. Doesn’t his thought encapsulate the writer’s thought-clichés of a solitary craft and Nietzschean Weltanschauung? Assuming these were deliberately planted, they are in Cole’s eyes (and not just his!) a creative foundation, formative in the quest for literary greatness. Of course, “what we call originality is little more than the fine blending of influences” (24). (We permit ourselves to notice that “little more” is nonetheless more.) Is not the subtle message, the deeper lesson here: the road to originality leads through the hackneyed? To leave off clichés you must be able to recognize them—and be on the alert, for they hide in plain sight! Well, it seems we would have passed the test, but as for getting the message…To this we take exception, if real writers are indeed such sworn enemies of clichés (marking their slalom up Mount Originality by being

skillfully avoided) as Cole makes them out to be, or if the good writer not into racing herds clichés together and puts them out to pasture.

Our view is, first of all, not so absolute. They may be tired from overwork, the job of communication and simplification, but clichés interest us a great deal. Rather than dumped, they can be (productively) dismantled, dissected, even “deconstructed.” They can keep us busy, serve as themes for literary creation. As foot-soldiers of rhetoric strategically deployed, they are indispensable. While they can replace the effort of original thought, they are hardly the seal of one-dimensionality. Often, they are the mind’s way of handling material too large or difficult for it. They pack chaotic thoughts into familiar, uncontroversial “notions” and set phrases for use in social situations that call for decorum and assent, or where “having opinions” is de rigueur. As such, they reveal their origins in the nineteenth-century bourgeois response to the greater pace, diversity and complexity of experience in much the way wit, a proof of brains and subtlety, was the nobility’s reaction to the absolutism of the old regime, and proverbs, to the pious tedium of peasant life.

Personally, we don’t deconstruct clichés. That requires a higher level of competence, just as castigating them calls for a touch of malice. But might Flaubert’s satirical “dictionary of received ideas” (spoofs, lampoons, commonplaces, bromides, platitudes—“all this so phrased that the reader would not know whether or not his leg was being pulled”) not give rise to a sympathetic, at once joyous and sobering work, one that exposes the psycho-logical mechanism of cliché, the tension latent within it, and reads and writes (re-writes) cliché against itself, undoing its power over us while leaving us its usefulness? Wait, hasn’t such a book already been written? Isn’t it Flaubert’s very own Bouvard and Pécuchet, the final monsterpiece to which his dictionnaire is customarily

appended? And it has, perversely, led some to fall in love with cliché.

The view endorsed by Cole that clichés are evidence of a herd mentality is difficult to sustain even at the loftiest heights with the thinnest air, where none but mountain goats can survive. We suspect greater profit to writers comes from urbane curiosity than from condescension, contempt, or derision. While we personally do not subvert or even interrogate clichés, we do like playing with them. Particularly with those cherished by the cultural elite: self-deprecation, false modesty, and yes, hatred of cliché—just a few of the many affectations adopted out of a mediocrity-complex in democracies of talent preserving inequality in the worship of elite genius (a hierarchy so entrenched it even enters Trotsky’s futuristic vision: “The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise”). We won’t “go there” as far as we perhaps could. And we could point out that the mature writer’s lesson to a young one turns paradoxically on just this highbrow cliché of genius, even if, we surmised, it does so self-ironically. Belief in one’s genius is perhaps a necessary self-deception to produce above-average work. Why, then, should verbal clichés be livestock slated for slaughter? It is enough to be butted by the smallest one, it seems, to suffer from fatuous and unreflected thinking—which is to say to bleat. Writing against cliché and common sense, Thoreau asked: “Why level downward to our dullest perception always, and praise that as common sense? The commonest sense is the sense of men asleep, which they express by snoring.”

Another pet cliché is the Modernist emphasis on failure as artistically noble, as the badge of latter-day genius, poor in the eyes of the world and therefore, in his own mind, swimming in untold riches, spawning only originality

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matches: a light book

(worthy compensation, if you ask us). The world could care less now, but it will care more (just watch), and maybe overmuch. Taking just literary creation, the summa of clichéd greatness—the writer as melancholic, as modern prophet, as sage, the book as labyrinth, as masterpiece, as birth, as gift—crowd around the end of its history as the old bond between language and art, which we call literature, dissolves and its once-wide bandwidth on the spectrum of writing shrinks and turns invisible.

Clichés put down roots deep in our reality, and doing away with them needs must be done root-and-branch radically. A literary work comes along, tugs at them, or hacks away the branches, bent on eradicating the grand cliché of genius, and all it does is strengthen its updated clichéd definition (for which we thank the likes of Malcolm Gladwell):

GENIUS: rare and kicks in at the ten-thousandth hour

If some wind from the future blows hard enough to uproot genius, that great organizing idea on which we continue to elaborate, we will part with a lot more than just it.

A Are clichés and mystifications really all you’ve got to defend clichés with?

B Fool, you wouldn’t get it any other way. Try getting by without them!
§ Touché

“The terrible, like the painful, accommodates only the cliché.” As does the wonderful and the pleasurable—the clichés “Wow!” “Ah!” “OMG!”

§ Lose No Touch

Universal connectivity brings with it an obligation to keep tabs on the world. The meaning of “being in touch with reality” is migrating, along with reality, to another domain. The reality (in name only) with which we should remain in touch is thoroughly mediatized. “Being in touch” no longer denotes a realistic outlook and certified sanity, but knowing how to navigate and stay topical in the digital universe. If in the old sense it was imperative to tell fact from fiction, with the rest as trivial pursuit, it now does better to know what’s what, without regard to that trivial distinction.

* Cioran, Trouble with Being Born, 53.
Fetch! Now Roll Over!

One of the jobs of Luciano Floridi as chair of the European Commission’s Committee on Concepts Engineering is to advise on “the impact of information and communications technologies on the digital transformations occurring in the European Society.” Let’s not mistake the circularity of such a task for its level of difficulty. Its point might not be apparent to those only tuned in to pointlessness. The reciprocal impact of two aspects that appear to be sides of one coin—“information and communications technologies” and “digital transformations”—cannot, in truth, be overstated. The impact of dogs on canine behaviour, for instance!

Distimacies

Looking at the current affect-technology nexus, one question to ask is: how far does the supposed intimacy-by-gadgets reach, and should its deliberate “distribution” aim for wider but thinner coverage, or instead for greater focus and penetration? The first carries, despite the best intentions, the risk of eroding intimacy through cultivating facile, superficial ties with people who are likely (in effect or anyway) to remain at a distance. The assumption behind the idea of connecting speedily with something inmost in as many, or as often, as possible in these punctuated, mediated, not always controlled ways, is that we are all alike. As such, it encourages the misprision of others as mirrors of ourselves. On the other hand, or the second of the above options, thinking it better to concentrate intimacy-distribution, we risk reifying intimacy. We reify it when we insist on the mystery of the other and treat our connection with them as something to be gained over time, by wearing down the barriers of controlled, mediated access to them. We reify intimacy when it ceases to be simply a function of overcoming distance and communicating less and less formally with one another. Focused, probing intimacy may be too precious to support large-scale community-building, it is true. While it is probably fair to say that other people’s secrets are now largely given away, floating unbeknownst even to them in cyberspace, the celebration of collective intimacy would benefit from cynicism about the knowledge that private information reveals, and to whom. As our horses continue to trickle out of the barn, we might wonder whether those who venture too far in sharing themselves in the spirit of open access might eventually feel like they have been taken for a ride.
§ The End of Sharing?

Publicity, or the voluntary surrender, of personal experience makes such experience no less private, and possibly more. It puts it up for propertification just as the publication of ideas or sequences of words no one else has thought to publish bestows ownership on their source. The responsibility we bear today is considerable. We must be careful not to non-chalantly squander our precious experience, parting with it, letting it go unrecorded and thereby losing out on occasions for enrichment. The fans of Instagram and other media already sense what’s in the air: as consumers amuse themselves with new technology, share their work for free, and lose interest in conventional forms of entertainment, companies will redesign their offerings around customer preference, and will pay us for providing content in which acting or performance is absent or secondary to just “having experiences” and leading interesting lives. In the span of a few years, and as a direct result of this, the content of personal experience, the innermost private stuff, will be refashioned into so many ephemeral commodities. Then we will see if we are all better off as extroverts.
Mice

Much as secret messages and tools can be smuggled and escapes plotted even in the most secure prison, all kinds of forbidden material finds a way to circulate and miscreants slip through in even the most policed of modern societies. For in society individuals are like mice in a prison not built to hold them.

Damned to Fame

Most of us want fame and can’t get it. One would think that the “Becketts” of the world would frustrate us, incurring our resentment. But the opposite is true: they fascinate us, winning our love and still greater fame. The “Beckettian” predicament is attractive because it involves fame not despite one’s lack of talent, making the fame unmerited, but despite trying to avoid fame, and only late in life. The “Beckett” scenario soothes our resentment by playing right into it and into the fantasy of the only adequate compensation: getting more than we expected (note: not deserved). We turned our back on fame for making us wait—convinced that we are worthy of it, we rejected it when it was not forthcoming—but in the end fate tries to woo us back and more than makes it up to us—a fantasy not merely of delayed renown, but of delayed renown beyond our earlier, frustrated expectations. That the reward might be well worth the wait is all we need to reconcile ourselves to having to wait for it. Fantasies like “Beckett” keep alive the hope for this pleasant surprise.
Escaping Criticism

As much (as) it has cost you, that is what they will pay.
—Wittgenstein*

Many an author must have paused before Pere Borrell del Caso’s wittily titled Escaping Criticism (Escapando de la crítica, 1874). The subject, painted against a solid black background, is a barefoot boy who, stepping on the bottom of the trompe-l’œil frame, hands braced against its sides, seems about to jump out onto the gallery floor. Literary characters, first fleshed out on the page, have often taken on a life of their own in other media. They too have leapt through the frames of their stories, sometimes indeed to elude criticism. In this they were fulfilling the dream of the artist, to whom the autonomy of his work, its taking charge of its own fate, is proof of its greatness—which may have escaped even him.

When, however, we take Borrell del Caso’s boy to be the artist himself, his alter ego, fleeing his critics even before the picture is completed, we have trouble thinking of a similarly artfully artless getaway for the author of a book. One could of course leave the final pages blank, as some have. Yet this act of defiance would nowadays come across as a cheap and lazy trick. For while the painter painted throughout and to the very end, the author would have taken a break from writing or else wrapped up his work long before then. And for that the critics would never forgive him. He would lose them only after losing all his readers.

* Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 15.
Remember Me!

The old technology with which writers practiced their profession has left a permanent memento on the bodies of those middle-aged or older. As they type away, from the keyboard the deformed joint of the middle finger makes its silent reproach. To which the

WRITER.

The basic means of production with which I started out are history, but you can’t tell me I’m not a writer!

To which the

PROFESSIONAL DEFORMITY.

But you are a very different writer from the one that made me.
Writing-Ball

Schreibkugel ist ein Ding gleich mir: von Eisen
Und doch leicht zu verdrehn zumal auf Reisen.
Geduld und Takt muss reichlich man besitzen
Und feine Fingerchen, uns zu benuetzen.

(The Writing Ball is a thing just like me: of iron
And yet easy to twist, especially on journeys.
Patience and tact one must richly possess
And fine little fingers to use us.)

—Nietzsche on his spherical writing instrument*

The Mailing-Hansen writing-ball was no crystal ball, and both have gone the way of most material objects. Once among the most praised, the most prized, the most sought-after possessions, source of uncountable revenues, they have been crushed and obliterated, on view since only in museums, where even the best-preserved specimens resemble embalmed carcasses.

Despite his less-than-productive relationship with his writing-ball—a portable brass proto-typewriter—Nietzsche's eulogy attests to his high hopes and a tenderness that anyone so dependent on an instrument ought to find within themselves. A moment's selflessness will show us the thing in its true light—as a slave—as Helvétius showed Europe's sugar-eaters their cubes were soaked in blood, pointing to a debt to the tropics. We owe an object the same credit, care, and respect we have begun to show other humans, but also animals and the natural environment. Man-made things are merely a still more transformed or mutilated nature. Their preservation has long been justified on the grounds that they serve as our historical markers, but as the rate of change increased, objects once accumulating without reflection

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became subject (like people, and often with the same technologies) to progressively rational classification, periodization, and archivization. Our anxiety about history is turning the world into a vast museum, compartmentalizing space into the modern and the historical, with nature parks in the latter category. Product care, life extension, and d.i.y. are only the first, baby-steps to be taken against this relentless musealization, and towards the recognition of objects as bearers of rights akin to ours. Consumer resistance must build to end self-obsolescing design in hardware and programming. Beyond it lie meaningful relationships with things and a new appreciation of imperfection, for which we have lost all tolerance, but which art (like Nietzsche’s verses) — entrusted with the “routine invitation to break out of reality” so it is “not entirely lost with us”* — has kept alive.

Talking Pencil

None of the Robespierres of the world knew how to make a pencil, yet they wanted to remake entire societies.
—Lawrence W. Read, introduction to “I, Pencil” (1958)

In a seminal pamphlet of American neoliberalism, the invisible hand of the market speaks through a pencil, underlining the complexity of its creation. The metonymic chain (market to hand to pencil) is warranted by the hand’s and the tool’s long history as a versatile creative extension of man. In at least one children’s story, a simple pencil makes dreams come true. Are not the pencil’s wish-fulfilling powers only amplified under capitalism, where “back to the drawing board” captures the spirit of unremitting innovation?

§ Doggedly Smart

*The best art is the most expensive because the market is so smart.*

—Tobias Meyer, former Sotheby’s auctioneer

Price following quality in art is the market’s brilliance at work. Before the market can prove itself so smart, however, quality art must be discovered. Markets have never discovered anything; they have followed, doggedly and expansively, the scent of discovery. *Discovery*—now that takes real brainpower, next to which the market looks rather stupid, with its long face and beagle eyes. Markets never pass up an opportunity to make themselves look smarter than they are. This might shed light on the Victorian fondness for portraits of (especially hunting) dogs looking very smart. Upstaged by a party of bulldogs, spaniels and terriers, the well-bred, prosperous men in top hats assembled in *An Early Canine Meeting* (1855) look none too clever as it emerges whose is in fact the *master’s voice*.

The Story of Your Life

Take risks, manage them, capitalize on your experience, and live off the accumulated surplus into rotten old age.

Poor in Spirit, Rich in Irony

A  As a wise man of small means once said: you cease being poor when you have nothing left.

B  You keep talking about poverty as if you knew it. I think you romanticize it!

A  Don’t you mean “ironize”? The poor have a greater sense of irony, and irony is the key to survival.

B  The lower their expectations, the less likely for fate to take them by surprise…

A  …and take away the wages of irony!

Desk Jobs

The lives of paper-pushers are wearing paper-thin.

And those of keyboard-tappers?

Barely a-flicker.
§ No Go Stop

For many a working stiff, a living wage will come too late, if it comes at all.

§ Subtle Reversal

*Automate* living and *work* for thinking.

§ Pretty Penny; or, Get Rich at All Cost

A penny for my thoughts?

*How much?! You should know better, young lady, than to prostitute your mind in this way!*

I just want to be successful, like you men.

*Then there’s no price you’ll soon not be ready to pay, and be poorly repaid for.*

§ Fruit of Capital

Contrary to what people say, money does grow on trees. It is called interest: the formerly forbidden fruit that gives no flesh, only seeds.
Everything material and immaterial has its market price. In everyday parlance, *priceless* still means having a value beyond all price, being of inestimable worth, usually because of being recognized as one of a kind, irreducible, “not for sale.” Less commonly (if more prosaically), the word can designate something that is either *substantially* “worthless”—its lack of (even an implicit) price tag suggesting it might not be worth having—or *nominally* so, in the sense that it has not been priced yet (ever, or anew). (This is the land of free enterprise, but also, with the depletion of the pool of commodifiable things, of declining rates of return.)

All of these senses of “pricelessness” came into play recently in regards to Spitsbergen, the Arctic island coveted by a Chinese investor: its value declared by the sale’s opponents as incalculable not only on account of its “uniqueness,” but also because its economic as well as strategic importance, currently *minimal*, may well exceed the wildest estimates, and can therefore only be assessed in the future—mustn’t, that is, yet be determined.

The more life becomes commodified, the more the definition of *pricelessness* is harnessed to the subjective devalorization of things before they hit the market. Pricelessness, a concept of value touched by the money form but not absorbed by it, is thus continually assailed and offers less and less—not more—resistance. Put in other words, the truly *priceless* object is becoming *structurally* worthless—“free” to be given away. If it *still* (or *already*) costs nothing, it must be without value, and thus counts for little, if anything. So when a price is finally named, it’s what we’d call *a steal*. 
§ Make Me an Offer

Haggling, encouraged by the impersonal character of online retail, breaks the tyranny of the fixed price on the white market.

§ Price of Life

You give your life or pay with your life for something (a fatherland, a mistake). You give a price in one sense, as a vendor, and pay it in another, as a customer. Which is better: naming the price of your own life, or paying a price with it? Is the vendor really more in control?

§ Piss-Poor

If “excess is excrement,”* then lack is piss.

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§ American Poverty

Why are Americans not dealing with poverty at home? Perhaps because poverty elsewhere seems easier to alleviate.

§ Captives

“It is unfortunate for men,” wrote Chamfort, but “fortunate perhaps for tyrants, that the poor and unhappy have not the instinct or pride of the elephant which does not reproduce itself in servitude.” As far as why this is, we must again blame reason, survival, and hope. For those in servitude (which is more diffuse and abstract, particularly if it includes slavery to an idea or system, the more socially total it is), those held in bondage by men or something men have contrived reason that their masters, their slavers, are rational, and if that alone does not help, they are also mortal. The reproduction of a system of enslavement depends equally on the continual delivery of able bodies and on the methodical application of rationality to human affairs. Exploitation, without which oppression would lose its sinister tone (mutating into mere suppression or depression), demands it absolutely. Once we grant mirror reason — mirroring that of their captors — to those whom we regard with compassion as dehumanized, as incompletely dead, as the zombies of capital, their continued, even viral reproduction makes perfect sense. Elephants, however intelligent we are discovering them to be, still reason imperfectly, at least in captivity.

§ Against the Grain

If oppression ever got labelled “environmentally unsustainable,” it would be sustained.

§ Breaking Even

We could say along with Graeber that “Freedom has become the right to share in the proceeds of one’s own permanent enslavement,” or we could admit that the language of paradox is of no use to us as long as the opposites remain cardboard extremes. We do not think that way, and the starkly ironic contrast appeals more to our love of rhetoric than to our sense of justice, which for the modern economic mentality has again become synonymous with breaking even.

§ Loose Change

Should one give credence to the Marxian happy “end” featuring the working class “expropriating the expropriators”? Some have said that in the process the expropriating workers will become a new breed of appropriators. That the only difference between them and their former expropriators will be their moral complacency that they have done right by themselves when they were still being exploited. History has borne out this prediction. And when has *wrested* ownership ever entailed care for what is owned? Expropriation from below that does not tip over into appropriation is doomed by its ironic mimicry of dispossession — by a wrangle that leaves the bones of contention themselves in the dust. And who will take care of the ex-property once the dust settles? Should one not hope, rather, that *possession* will soon be seen as too great a burden, a limit on remaining freedom (redefined), and that the disposal of property becomes a voluntary act?

§ Poison Ivy

The ivy law of minimum wage is that it creeps up while covering an ever larger surface.
§ Ad coelum et ad nihilum

In medieval property law which survives in weakened form in some countries, like the United Kingdom, the owner of a plot of land owns it vertically: from the empty skies above it all the way to the centre of the Earth below. At this deepest point underground, however, its area necessarily amounts to zero. Following the same principle, on a downward survey of his possession, the owner of even the entirety of the globe’s surface, terrestrial and marine, would, at its lowest limit, see it diminish to nothing.

As long as no one possesses the centre of the Earth, absurdity shadows all landlords everywhere. He who would own everything above, down below would have no ground to stand on, let alone to plant his flag.

§ Nail Soup

In a memorable poem on the cunning of the gypsy man and the stupidity of the baba, the miserly peasant woman, we find the secret to good class (or are they now percentile?) relations. The impatience of the woman, curious to witness the miracle of “nail soup,” leads her to unthinkingly comply with the gypsy’s requests for incidentals. Pot, water, fire, butter, grain—all are provided—until finally a nail is produced that apparently gives the broth its distinctive flavour...

Does this not confirm that the poor can do just fine by themselves? They need only secure incredulous yet open-handed admiration from those who will continue to eat their fill, realizing (perhaps not for the first time) that they, too, owe their provisions to a scam, just several orders of magnitude greater.
Of Wolves and Gatsbies

The difference between luxury and decadence is essentially this: the former spends money unimaginatively, the latter, creatively. If the first orders golden faucets, the second commissions sinks made from turtle shells. If the first imagines only what others want and wants that, the second prizes originality and invention. Fortunes spent on luxury degrade taste, those paid to decadence only refine it. Either way, the show of wealth carries great implications for judgments of taste, since good taste can now be afforded.

Piggy Bank

A pig for good luck? The association of pigs with good fortune in the Glücksschwein, or lucky pig, no less than that of good fortune with wealth, has to answer for the symbol of prosperity in Old-World lore and the worldwide popularity of the piggy bank. When we tell our children that having money is in some magical sense about good luck, we prime them for seeing reason in trading or gambling away their meagre savings. Why not rather tell them “Money turns people into swine,” and prove it by breaking the pig-bank, then pocketing its contents?
Worker Bee

It is difficult to rejoice for the bee preserved in amber—a substance so much in colour like her own nectar as to seem a rewarding tomb. It is not hard, by contrast, to see the irony of being buried in one’s work. When the honey of our labour is judged only as a means to an end (mind you, not that kind of end!), our sense of purpose squirms in misdirected empathy.

Tan Lines

On the outstretched arms of white beggars the sun marks the global colour line.
§ The Eyes of the Poor

The poor are closer to a better because more morally defensible world, even when they have been reduced to crime, not merely by imagining that world, but by thinking it universally desirable and possible. The question “how much better is significantly better?” and thus worth fighting for is moot as long as the needy abstain from political action.

And if they do not imagine this world, it is not from a failure of imagination, but from imagination’s devastation. And if they do not desire it, it is not from a failure of desire, but from desire’s distracted aggravation by a world in which they nonetheless live. And if they do not think it possible, it is not by dint of having been deprived of hope, but of hope’s superabundance. Then, however rich in hope, they are poor twice over—not just from failing to enrich themselves, but from seeing only riches in riches, and nothing save poverty in poverty. The naïve and arrogant view of the poor is that they are naïve and humble; they believe happiness lies in wealth (if they only knew the truth!). But why would they mistake happiness for material comfort who must have known happiness without it? Step forward, you who see an end to misery in the end to destitution. The miserable, the poor in spirit, are much harder to get rid of than the materially poor. Some of these latter, indeed, console themselves that “actual possession of the happiness of this life, without the hope of what is beyond, is but a false happiness and profound misery.”

Where such hope runs—though imagination, worldly desire, and a sense of possibility be absent—the happiness derived from a meagre life is fortified with an otherworldly spirit.

A Ah, but the poor, on the whole, have better eyes!

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Because they see farther than the rest of us? It’s true. But they are worse on what’s up close — a necessary optical tradeoff.

Nothing evokes abject poverty more than hunger that has begun to consume the flesh. Some lessons can only be learned bodily. The sunken eyes of the poor, who have learned their lessons well, can they teach us anything? That hunger is all-unmanning, all-consuming and unequivocal, Dickensian and tone-deaf. That where hunger reigns, life is beastly at best. The beasts of hunger are not wild at heart; they are driven wild by it.

The appetite of the poor is larger than their belly.

When they only eat with their eyes, how can they be sated?

No, there is more to hunger than meets the eye, and the eyes do not always give it away. As long as poverty and hunger are around, there will be important lessons for which no other teachers but hunger and poverty will do. Without a general “vow of poverty” to edify us, poverty as such will not be eradicated.

Until then, and as a matter of precaution, make sure to wear your distance glasses from time to time. So that the future isn’t a complete surprise.
Engels and Marx at Chetham’s Library

A windowed alcove at England’s first public library overlooked one of Manchester’s rookeries, or slums, near Victoria Station. Sitting there as they often did, they could see while reading the State of the Poor (the work of Eden, after the Revolution). And when they put their heads together, it was to make it disappear.

Bottoms Up!

No matter how many times you drink down to the dregs, you won’t know what it is to have only dregs to drink. And knowing that, by Jerome’s lights, is knowing the law of the world.

Call out All the Names under the Sun

If one were to make a project of calling out every word, good and bad, available in memory and books, one would never see the end of it, and die calling. The words invented by man and the historical bonds that link them are too many for anyone to utter them. One’s speech does well to ignore them.

For their inherited wealth pales against the poverty of individual freedom of invention, which accounts for one’s having a name at all. Just as the rich can freely give up their inheritance to become poor, what we are called and called upon to do can be cast off by inventing a calling for ourselves. While not much, for some it is enough to live on.
§ Soft Landing

We would sooner take to our beds, defeated, than stand up and fight for happiness. Happiness (not to be confused with joy) and unhappiness (not to be confused with sadness) are reifications of the pursuit of continual joy and the flight from continual sadness, respectively. When we feel we have stumbled in our quest for joy, we rightly conclude that we are not happy. When we then fall in our escape from sadness, we realize that unhappiness has caught up with us. It is with great effort that we pick ourselves up again—often getting only as far as the first bed that will take us.

§ Uncomfortable Happiness

Identifying comfort with happiness would be like mistaking your social standing for your inner life—were inner life not a mere flight from your social standing.

Do we not owe it to our high conception of the good life to transcend such divisions into “inner” and “outer,” even if it itself proves impracticable?
§ Sore Spots

Do we owe it to ourselves to be happy even when others are unhappy? No more than we owe these others to be miserable on their account.

Let him who can be happy in knowledge or ignorance of others’ unhappiness be as happy as possible. But let the law punish happiness when it depends on the unhappiness of others. Let it even levy a tax on happiness. And let resentment litigate against unjust happiness in some future court.

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No man is a slave to his own well-being, not because well-being has no power to enslave, but because he is never fully well. And if he were well, he would be the master of well-being.

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The desperate pursuit of happiness is justified as long as suffering is guaranteed.

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