Matches

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§ Multitasking

“In communist society,” wrote Marx and Engels, meaning a society in which the division of labour has been abolished, “where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman, or critic.”

The vision of happiness in varying one’s activities at will through the course of the day has its funhouse reflection in the simultaneous performance of multiple tasks so common in our time. The current state of affairs distorts our notions of Engels’ desired and diverse occupations to the point of either mistrusting exclusive focus on any of them one at a time (to the neglect of other things), or being unable to conceive of any of them as satisfying in its own right. Let us not mention that the very conception of specialization, reduced to mindlessness by the assembly line and to mental illness in diagnoses of autism, whether at work or at leisure, is historically inseparable from a society organized around divided labour, which we oppose in principle. It is not only limiting; it is unfair and even against nature.

Is multitasking in our sense of the word an antidote to the ills of this industrial model? Facilitated by technology, the many unherculean labours we perform, covering the breadth of our attention and multiplying, are quite predictably beginning to run together. Less and less discrete, they are perhaps all the more inescapable for that very reason. The coming status quo—in which time is not divided between larger tasks (only subdivided between sub-tasks, and shared between part-time jobs), in which work blends into leisure—is merely one result of surplus value production being transferred back to increasingly adaptable consumers, whose education every year shifts towards transferable skills, in tandem with the surging rate of obsolescence of specialized means of production, know-hows, and knowledges. What becomes clear is that, while the division of labour may remain incompatible with free society, labour’s multiplication, creeping and rapacious, is not a happy alternative; it merely enslaves more securely.

Practically History

In Canada, they are building a memorial to the victims of communism. Some, allergic to such improvident anachronism, ask “Why not build one to the victims of capitalism instead?” “We know, we know,” they answer before the ruling “elite” has had an opportunity to address their concerns. “First of all, it is bad luck to memorialize the living. Second of all, communist China, North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba have already one foot in the grave.”
In an informal economy, freedom from workplace regimentation is forfeited again by the induction of domestic activities into the home-work continuum. Everyday tasks increasingly mimic paid labour which, while accommodating to the point of taking place around them, in fact seeps into their very performance by virtue of its proximity and the removal of earlier forms of separation. By carving out time to “work around” meals, house chores, animal and child-care, horticulture and exercise — personal tasks for most of which remuneration has not yet been invented — the worker-from-home gradually comes to treat all activity as an object for regulation, efficiency optimization, and a problem in need of a workaround. “I’ve got a system for that!” “I can get so much more done now! I’ve worked out which tasks go best together and bundle them for multitasking. It helps if you break things down to the minute!” “My new personal workflow and task management tools work wonders for my personal life!” This is no mere rodomontade. The energies of these two domains, work and life, have long intersected, and their spheres have overlapped before. What is new and different is the infection of everyday and leisure activities with the Trojan horse of technology. On the pretext of helping us step up our game and get our act together, it rules our lives with a soft despotism. Enabled by apps and wearables, self-micromanagement flies under the radar and is glamourized as “life hacking.” The form of wage labour, in which time management is paramount, has thus come to structure and shape a whole domain of tangential tasks that previously escaped capital’s oversight and even served as a counterweight to it. Along this vector, in an aggressive free-market economy the line between “real” work and earning on the side melts away as competition for consumers reaches new levels of sophistication and desperation. Between brand ambassadors and the glut of targeted advertising, putting two and two together isn’t hard. The day is not far off when what we put in our mouth will be bought by the labour of eating it, and a simple track suit paid for by the job
of jogging in it. Only let’s not fool ourselves that what follows from this is freedom.

§ Fingers Crossed

Day in, day out, we subscribe to a vision of capitalism as the subtle and not-so-subtle invader that overcomes every limit and constraint by hypnotic powers of suggestion or, failing that, brute force. What the affluent disparage from their perches—capital’s greedy annexation of unspoiled reality—threadbare humanity welcomes as its only savior, counting not on the hearts of individual entrepreneurs, industrialists, and financiers, but on the invisible digits that, by reaching them, will at last take away its pain. At its logical conclusion, this image of “Faustian” expansion ought itself to be erased in capital’s magic-slate reinvention, culminating perhaps in total invisibility. The capital to come is something those interested, those who either think outside the ideological box or pray inside it, equally cannot predict. But the handful of others, who see it coming and recognize each other in the fog by a certain gesture or wink, go by a simple rule: what expands must one day contract, even in geopolitical time.
§ Mutatio mundi

Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert, es kömmt drauf an sie zu verändern.

(Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.)

—Karl Marx, Eleventh Thesis*

In the last of his Feuerbach Theses (1845), Marx confronts philosophy with its material inefficacy. The skeleton of Hegelian dialectic pushes the mind into overdrive. (From now on, philosophy will barely function without this economical gearing-up for putting its surplus energy to good use.)

His own determination aside, Marx’s enjoinder (or note to self) carries an implicit question: how can philosophy become praxis? And how can the becoming-praxis of philosophy become its motive force, instead of an afterthought? But the eleventh thesis, which opens up thought to this question — by calling for this transformation of thinking into doing, for doing philosophy on the way to politics, with a view to politics — instructs, above all, that philosophy must start this total world-transformation with itself: it must first recognize the change it itself has undergone and is undergoing, confirm the rightness and purpose of this change, and assess its place in the world today. It is, in this sense, already a step in the direction in which it is pointing. (The position is still idealist, its point of departure the revolutionary, world-altering potential of Christianity, as in Novalis’s much earlier vatic essay, but clearly also a turning away from religion’s monopoly over politics; philosophy’s move in the direction of a secular politics is inseparable from the philosophical move towards historical materialism and the supersession of idealist philosophy it implies.)

As such, Marx’s maxim is grounded in three refusals:

* Karl Marx, Die Frühschriften, ed. Siegfried Landshut (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1971), 341.
· the refusal of anachronism. All philosophy participates in the historical process and its activity and proactivity confirm its currency; it is there at the dawn of the event;

· the refusal of abstraction. As a reflective and critical reaction to the world, philosophy is rooted in particular contexts, to which it must recognize itself duty-bound and from which it cannot abstract itself; it is part of a world that needs changing; lastly,

· the refusal of contingency. The course and future of philosophy derive from universal values and historical necessity.

But Marx's words cannot themselves accomplish what they call for, which is new to philosophy. They are conscious of communicating a novelty to thought. They are a call for a new totality (the world), in the making of which philosophy can—must—cannot but participate, and the enormity of the task requires marshalling the totality of philosophy, a move so revolutionary as to pull thought out of its orbit. In theology, exegesis, prayer, the task of thought exceeded its worldly limit; with modern philosophy, thought sets for itself a task at once greater than itself and within its new limits, which it projects and identifies with those of the world. The last Feuerbach thesis is furthest out in this respect, jutting out like a pier into swelling waters, its pillars firmly planted in the ocean floor. At the end of it stands the revolutionary visionary. Diverting his gaze from the dreamy horizon now back towards dry land, now down into the depths below, is the tension in his breast between the beachcomber and the pearl diver. These symbolic oppositions will structure materialist philosophy’s self-understanding and anxiety vis-à-vis politics. Politics is the truth of philosophy, where it tests its mettle and proves its worth for the future. But its proof will only be given if it comes to politics, which it must at the same time revitalize, alter. To change the world, it must share its place in it with revolutionary struggle.
§ Dip Sheep

In Dziga Vertov’s *Sixth Part of the World* (1926), a montage of machines and sheep dipped in different waters accompanies a revolutionary appeal:

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more machines / more / and more / but no less hard is it
for the worker / … / the slaves / the colonies / Capital / the
slaves / … / Capital is on the verge of its historical perishing
/ Capital / is having fun /
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You,
who bathe
your sheep /
in the surf of the sea,
and you,
    who bathe
your sheep /
in a brook /
...
and You /
who have overrun the power of Capital in October /
who have opened
the road
    to new
life*

Infinitely adaptable, capitalism today cannot be set apart as *counter-nature*, as it was “in October,” when the Soviet harmony of land, industry and man made up one-sixth of the globe. And *actually-surviving socialism* — what part of the world has it left? (Hint: next to none.)

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*Shestaya chast’ mira* (*One-Sixth of the World*), directed by Dziga Vertov (1926; Vienna: Filmmuseum, 2009), DVD.
§ Heart & Home

The savage who loves himself, his wife, and his child with quiet joy and glows with limited activity for his tribe as for his own life is, it seems to me, a more genuine being than that cultured shade who is enchanted by the shadow of his whole species.... In his poor hut, the former finds room for every stranger, receives him as a brother with impartial good humor and never asks whence he came. The inundated heart of the idle cosmopolitan is a home for no one.

—J.G. Herder

Political ignorance extends to the idea that the nation-state is just a bigger home, in which all the nation’s families live in harmony as in a communal dwelling.

The cosmopolitan, whose knowledge of political community breaks with such sentiments, rejects this Aristotelian conception of the state as home-land—as much as the idea that politics needs a fixed abode—fixed by familial-national attachment. Regardless of what he calls home, his true home is his heart—his cosmopolitan heart. And this home is his politics.

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§ What’s What

You’ll have a better understanding of what was actually done if you start by knowing what had to be done — what always and everywhere has to be done by anyone who has a clear idea about what’s what.

—Aldous Huxley, Island

Without knowing “what’s what,” the great question asked and answered by Chernyshevsky in his own utopian novel — Shto delat’? “What is to be done?” — can only be answered wrongly. “What’s what” may just be gnomic and humdrum enough to bag the right and universal.

§ Beggar Thy Neighbour’s Culture

It is a peculiar species of cosmopolitanism: taking oneself from a place poor in culture to one that has plenty.

Far Away, So Close

The more the sense of foreignness becomes a thing of the past among those who do not travel at all or travel nonstop, the greater their craving for imaginary spaces. These mental wonderlands and nominal utopias that recapture foreignness in exaggerated form (which is a function of their perceived impossibility) make their reality not only bearable but better known. “What do they know of England who only England know?” And what do they know of the world who are over-familiar with it? Those who manage to invent for themselves such “other” spaces, such “non-places,” have the distance needed to see what their world is—the foreignness needed to build knowledge upon familiarity.

The homebound can best know their home not by covering distances but by moving back through time. Digging into local history brings out the foreignness of familiar places obscured by encroaching globalization. The constant traveller can best know the world not by “doing” all of it, following the links highlighted or created by globalization, but by efforts to connect with local values, traditions, and ways of life wherever they go. Most travellers, needless to say, can only afford time for a first glance. The truth of the places they touch down in rarely appears at their beck and call.
Pebbles

No state is an island, though some have that shape. Casting votes outside of our country of residence wherever else we happen to enjoy voting rights is not only no failing but a political duty. *Ubi bene ibi patria*, and we should do everything in our power to protect this good wherever we are by supporting it elsewhere. In a world so closely linked, the West is no larger than a pond, and a vote cast in one corner is no smaller than the *psephos* thrown into an urn in the Golden Age of Athenian democracy. The results of an election ripple out to distant parts almost instantly, affecting our lives there.

Born Idealist

“It's not me you should be worried about.”
§ Future Optimists

Soon even bloodshot, tear-filled eyes will be decried as rose-tinted glasses.

§ Future Humblebrag

“I’ve been to Earth and back.”

§ Priceless

A map of utopia is not worth the paper it’s printed on.

§ Critical Utopia

Impartial accounts of utopia can do no more than point in the general direction and dwell upon the journey there. But a partial one can (if used correctly) tell us where not to go, what to avoid. Whether or not its author intended it as a map of the place itself—a blueprint for how to get it built—or as a picture to meditate on—unrealizable by design—it will keep its critical value as long as we look at it askance from time to time.
§ Missing Part

The map of utopia is partial. No one has the missing part.

§ All or Nothing

A Gracián says that “Reality can never match our expectations, because it’s easy to imagine perfection, and very difficult to achieve it.” Isn’t imagining perfection half-way to achieving it? Isn’t the ease with which it is imagined encouragement to really make it happen?

A’ Is it really so easy to imagine perfection? I think it is the hard—the harder part, and that is why it is next to impossible to achieve perfection. Before we try imagining perfection, we must realize the imperfection of the imagination: what it leaves vague and undefined becomes the breeding ground of error.

A If the image were perfect and understood, it would be executed with ease. But since it is neither, since those who imagine have no sense of executing and those who execute have no imagination, both are equally impossible.

A’ With absolutes, it is always “all or nothing.” That’s why we are always left with nothing.

§ Paeninsula fortunatorum

Even if they are judged by an abstract criterion of truth-telling, it may be doubted whether Utopians have, in fact, distorted the future any more than historians have the past.

—Frank E. Manuel

There is no more need to defend the innocence of Utopia once we discover Alibia. Its inhabitants, called Alibis (from the Latin alibi, “elsewhere”) — or Alibris (from a-libris, or “book-less”), as they like to call themselves — carry out a great work of imagination, the ideal republic by the name of Alibia. The Alibis not only recognize that this work ought to be done, but regard it as the all-important, all-consuming work — in short, the only real work to be done — since without it Alibia could not exist at all.

Rumours that they live on nothing but air and have no interaction with the rest of the world were disproved long ago. Those who accuse them of using some poor subterranean devils to provide for their material needs are grasping at straws. The Alibis are neither without needs nor have so many to rely on a system of exploitation.

They are, instead, engaged in a gainful if delicate commerce, moving the intangibles they produce to provide for themselves. There is no lack of outsiders willing to trade the material fruits of their labour for the purely immaterial work of the Alibis. And if they try their hand at imagining Alibia and do well, these outsiders might one day be made citizens. (Though there are many great minds in Alibia, one type seldom seen there is the metaphysician.) Imagination, their sole livelihood, puts the Alibis “off the map” of ordinary tourists and commercial travellers apparently content with their lot. “It is a common mistake to call Alibia an island,” they explain, “when it is merely a peninsula. The geographers continue to falsify us. Unlike the Utopians, we have never cut ourselves

off from the mainland.” The work and land of the Alibis, though outlying, have always been accessible to the curious.

One is tempted to describe their way of life in the utopian genre, in a *libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae deque nova paeninsula* . . . But from an observer’s perspective there is almost nothing to Alibia, not enough to fill even a *libellus*, not even for a “little” book. And anyone who is “inside” and tries then to describe Alibia is no longer participating in its construction, so instantly loses their place in it (as they would a radio frequency). Yet this has not stopped us from speculating about the boundlessness of imagination at work there—at any point, the Alibis see further than we do, far beyond our present horizons. They have no use for memories and archives; their work is valuable only insofar as, at any given moment, they transcend what each has done (imagined) up to that point (n.b., the absence of competition, which they consider unhealthy). Thus they are constantly building, improving, and upgrading their Alibia, including the ideals espoused there, so that it is never anything less than ideal.

For the above reasons, and as signalled by the extra *r* in their self-chosen name, the Alibris are a book-less people. Alibia is the name for a continuous work of imagination that is never written down. Without a guide, visitors to Alibia who trade with its inhabitants come away with no more than what they are allowed to see in exchange: a vague impression of the republic’s real-world size, structure, and power; a few glimpses of its wonders, perhaps, but never a full or coherent picture.

Based on these scraps of information, some maliciously interpret the name “Alibri” as “freedom-less,” enslaved to imagination, when in fact every Alibi finds in the

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imagination what is perhaps freedom’s highest form. These disaffected traders, who clearly have no sense of even the rudiments of its law, are always hatching plots to invade and enslave Alibia. This is another, and most important, reason for why the Alibris do not write books. For they have no standing army, and no other defence.

§ In the Dark

One might approach utopia in the dark without ever realizing it.

§ Impossible but Necessary

Even in us cynics, beauty and purity will always find a hiding place as long as we dwell on the world’s ugliness and impurities.

§ Great Expectations

A utopian, far from being unreconciled to the state of the world, has only the highest hopes for it.
§ Means without End

Is it a joke? There is not much that isn’t open to ridicule here: a utopian prefiguration of poverty! After all, how can the slavishly exploited (those lacking what counts as “means to spare”), the truly solidary who willingly gave up their spare and excess means in return for the truth of struggle against “scarcity,” who make ends meet in the struggle’s day to day, who instead of “minding the gap” between where they are and where they’d like to be have wound up dwelling in it bodily — how can they actively prefigure a collective utopia? Going (in)voluntarily without may be a form of political rehab, but how can their stance, expressed in a struggle against the very deprivation they seem in solidarity to embrace, be assimilable to actually modelling a changed reality, high-minded ideas and fellow feeling aside? A world without means to spare surely is no better; almost anything else seems better than it.

Yet it is precisely from a position of radically reduced resources that this “better world” is not only possible but vaguely full of possibilities. The challenge of living in it lies not in coming up with universalizing ideas and ingenious solutions — or the revolutionary toolkit such a common condition engenders — but in a counter-praxis of everyday life, freed from the acquisitive impulse, detached from workaday rewards (no matter how meagre or substantial). Prefiguration is not an exact science. It is a gesture towards another way of living arising directly from a chosen position of material lack. It is a call to a new resourcefulness. It is a practical intentional experiment placed as a road sign. As such, it owes its creative potency, political urgency, and persistence to its negation of the ends-without-means and normative practices of the existing social configuration, with which it seeks to break as much as possible short of losing touch with, and thus the ability to redirect, the traffic of discontent with how mean-ingless things actually are. The mere practices of living-against while being together side by side in full view — practices that go beyond what is at our disposal — these are the new, the inexhaustible, means.
Jason Getting Horizontal

The importance of social dreaming only reminds us that the anarcho-politics of horizontality and slumber remains to be theorized. Once we theorize the utopian position, we might find there is some truth to Nietzsche’s preposterous claim that “Tiredness is the shortest path to equality and fraternity—and sleep finally adds to them liberty,” and to Baltasar Gracián’s observation that “the pillow is a silent Sibyl.”

Resentment

What, at base, is resentment, if not the need for equality clumsily expressed?

§ In Bad Company

What is resentment if not the need for equality expressed in company that does not share this need?

§ Family Pet

Family pets are among the most abused of animals, even when their tails are not being pulled, etc. But since we try to treat them as humans, and often with greater care and solicitude, we are all but blind to this fact. In their systematic abuse we glimpse only our utopia.
A Parting Gift

in response to:

And then there was what the coroner described like this: “a 5 3/4 x 4 inch gaping laceration involving the pubic region and bilateral medial thighs with the absence of genitalia, exposure of the pubic bones and adjacent soft tissue.” Or, to spell it out: By the time the body was recovered, no part of his external genitalia remained. Where they should have been, there was nothing but a raw gap. That was Terry Thompson’s final grotesque parting gift—a last meal for one of his animals, sometime before it, too, met its death by bullet on the sad night of October 18, 2011, near Zanesville, Ohio.

—Chris Heath, “18 Tigers, 17 Lions, 8 Bears, 3 Cougars, 2 Wolves, 1 Baboon, 1 Macaque, and 1 Man Dead in Ohio”

Too severe masters turn the love of them to hatred.

—inscription on engraving by Paulus Potter*

Humans always look for symbolism where sense and reason seem to be lacking. Is eating one’s master—or the master’s virile part—significant enough to constitute a “parting gift” reeking of vengeance? The gift may have been mutual: from the initial victim to the later one—submission in the flesh to the long-dominated—and, somewhat less intuitively, from the animal to its cruel keeper—the granting of the latter’s repressed wish. Yet that it is the external reproductive organs that should be devoured seems somehow poetically fitting, and reminiscent of The Punishment of a Hunter, a famous seventeenth-century canvas in a series of narrative

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panels by Paulus Potter. In it, the animals take their revenge on their persecutor and tormentor—by prosecuting and executing him. His trial features a multispecies jury, fox as clerk, a lion for judge. The hunter is sentenced to death by roasting on a spit, as his hounds are strung up on an improvised gallows. In both cases—the American tragedy and the Dutch allegory—humans get their comeuppance. But the as-yet-unpainted story of the man from Ohio, who died by his own hand and was nibbled at by his menagerie, betokens a still higher justice where it refrains from imposing on animals the petty logic of ultimate revenge masked as legal deliberation.

§ Exuviae

When we are done thinking with animals, we discard them. The lab animal is a placeholder for man until it is safe for man to be experimented upon. We emphasize our similarities with other animals when they can serve as stand-ins, quasi-doubles, and dissociate ourselves when we can exploit them in our stead. The source of animal melancholy, and of human melancholy concerning animals, is the recognition of this double hazard—experimentation/exploitation—for which we use animals to avoid what we’d rather not undergo if the animal can help it. But this describes only one of two present paradigms of our meeting with other species.

When humans yawn, they have animal faces; this is as welcome a thought today as the reverse* was a century ago. We have seen too much of man to think that we have a lock on natural dignity. “It isn’t in a bear’s nature to wear roller

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* “When animals yawn, they have human faces.” Kraus, Half-Truths, 120.
skates. It isn’t in an elephant’s nature to sit on a stool.”

When we enter a Dog Café or an Owl Bar, we picture a miniscule safari, where animals (in the majority) of the same general kind call the shots and set the limits on socialization. Rewilding initiatives express a secret longing for a reversal of relations. As we speak, circuses are refigured for human acts, and zoos, as exotic animal sanctuaries. Petting zoos, where different species are on display for human enjoyment, will remain in spirit what the great zoological gardens once were in reality—the rationale behind the exemption being that children can do no harm, and relate to animals in a way adults only relate to death—with awe and fascination, rendering it untouchable. If democracy is still a large animal, as Plato had it, then we have shrunk from featherless bipeds to the size of fleas upon its back, and soon will be microbes; the more there are of us, the more unsustainable we become, the more we reimagine humankind as parasitic. We will continue to use animals to disguise our ignobility; what nature they shed or cast off, we will pick up.

§ Single-Minded Pursuits

*What is a Cat? It is a rectification…. The mouse plus the cat equals the revised and corrected proofs of Creation.*
—Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*

As the revolutionary mole was digging tunnels beneath Paris, beneath even its catacombs, Hugo saw God’s revised plans for the world as a game of cat and mouse, without rules other than those of nature. It goes without saying that this blueprint for Genesis and this game-logic of history have not been binding with us. If their simplicity beguiles, it’s because we are complicating creatures, with far too many objectives and not enough pursuits, and look to animals for a lost single-mindedness.

How long have we bemoaned the fact that man, given the right (read: wrong) environment, reverts to an animal-like existence? The fascination with wild men of the woods and feral children goes back to Gilgamesh and Rome’s myth of origin, suggesting that the line between the civilized and the savage (on which the gods were never particularly hung up) can be all but erased. The more serious issue and source of anxiety has always been the line that kept the human savage separate from the beast. Today, when wild animals, animals that have not been trained to conform in their basic instincts to human civilization, are the real endangered species, it would be in the interest of science to study the exact degree of a human being’s (initially) voluntary reversion to an animal, on the level of identity, self-perception, consciousness… It might allow us to determine the point of maximum rapport and thus the optimal conditions for our kind and other species to meet. Yet we must also keep in mind that it is precisely the degree to which they cannot become animals that humans can be held accountable for their actions. If the experiment of human-to-animal reversion proves 100% successful, then, as with the atomic bomb, its design cannot be allowed to get out.
§ Double Standards

A You know what I miss? It was the first thing I kept hearing. A hallucination.
   The cat, the sound of its bell in the distance. I liked this cat, it was so autonomous, even if it was living off me. I didn't mind at all. I left it alone. But it was a cat.

B Still is, I'm sure.

A I never once thought of it: how ungrateful!
   Why do we have the opposite expectations of people? Should we even have them?

B How could we not?

A Because we don't have them of cats. Alright, I'll speak for myself: at least I don't have them.

B Maybe if you found a very small, very independent person who didn't speak . . . and occasionally brought home dead birds or mice . . .

A Come on, that's too easy a parallel. With such a person, I might well take them in as a cat—and only as long as they behaved like one.

   But my concern is with these two standards. Why is human sociability configured in this way? Why are better manners not expected of cats also? Don't we in fact resent them for it? Dogs, being trainable, are expected to behave. But cats—we say it's in their nature to ignore. We resent but feel obliged to forgive, no?

   Human nature, by comparison, is open (or, anyway, has opened up). Yet, as far as human sociability goes, we take it as a universal that if one can relate and reciprocate, then one ought to, at least on those occasions when one is someone else's beneficiary. And even if one, at a minimum, relates in such a case, does that mean one is also reciprocating? No, one must make a point of
reciprocating, or else prove that one really can’t. Those who do nothing do resemble cats. Still, they differ and can’t get off the hook that easily. The thing is, they themselves have many expectations, including of their cat, if they have one—which they often do as a symbol of their “feline” nature. And this cat’s “selfish” indifference constantly disappoints them.

§ Arcadius Makes Headlines

“Even the winners can die,” begins a human interest piece.

“Steeplechase Horse Arcadius Dies after Winning”
We should all be so lucky!

“After the Best Race of His Life, a Horse’s Death”
To die is one thing, but to die in the rare case when achievement, quantity and quality, can be measured with such exactitude! That indeed is a pity.

“It was as if he knew he had won”—as if, that is, not really. From his perspective death came at the moment it wanted to come, not to underscore his triumph—a triumph in life, at the price of his life, not over life. An effort much greater because unsustainable, outside his limits, within his power only with that power’s total outlay—he sacrificed himself making it; running fast enough to make the finish-line his death—a feat far more impressive than the petty one you reward him for! Death came, dashing that triumph (exacting payment—not its asking but its telling price).
“He tried, he gave his all.”

The line reached in record time—the record of his life no less—cutting short his life, made vivid time’s relationship to speed, disproving that (at such small distances) the faster we go the more time we have left over, and the slower we can arrive at death. (You say that the faster we move the lesser the distance travelled relative to what we have come to expect—and so keep going, exhaustively, until the end catches up with you unawares). Compared to the Patagonian hare fleeing his pursuers all the way to his dying breath, staying ahead of (without losing or outlasting) them and pacing himself, adjusting his speed to extend the distance he has left, Arcadius, not ahead to begin with, came out ahead of his rivals and by adjusting his speed seems to have shortened the time at his disposal. He went not as far as he could, but as fast, as though in pursuit of success, not mere survival. The finish line was not fine, nor was he.

The lamentable anthropomorphism of the tragic racehorse makes for a moving story—almost as good as that of Bach’s unfinished fugue, over whose last notes, spelling (in German notation) the word BACH (“stream”), he is said to have breathed his last.

§ Beauty & Death

Beauty need not be moving to be a close ally of death.

§ Hit and Miss

All-but-invincibility does not require your weak spot to be no more than the size of a heel. A heel-sized patch of inhuman strength is enough if it is in the right place; an area the size of a heart can make one immune if one’s assailant assumes this to be the most vulnerable point, unloading his entire magazine into your chest. Now let’s say your “heart” is made of stone, a stone-cold kind of vanity, and you, though wounded and reeling from the attack, survive. Rather than take aim again, this time at our stomach or head, which would-be assassin would not back away, incredulous, and be laid thus by the heels?

§ The Average American

An American in his late 50s learns he has a year to live. Diagnosed with an obscure terminal illness he is advised to cope with the certainty of imminent death by making the most of the time left to him and to seek solace in spirituality. He makes no arrangements for his burial or cremation. Rejecting death with dignity, he seeks an atavistic terminus. Using up all his savings, he has himself parachuted into the heart of the Amazon, where he wants to live out his days without provisions or weapons. His wish is to die like prehistoric man: in combat with wild beasts. He wants to revert to the zero-point of consciousness and human evolution.
§ Insulation

Books are the original insulator. A shelf of books along an outside wall works well to prevent heat escaping. If all the books were removed from the homes in Britain, our energy bills would rocket.

—Joel Rickett

The electronic book has no such added utility. It can no more insulate than shelter. A “lettered recess”† of e-books is to a refuge as a house of cards is to one made of brick and mortar. The feeling of being walled in is gone, but so is that of having a roof over one’s head.

§ What You Want Is What You Get

Consumers have been educated by the market and now the median level of cultural competence is much higher. A basic rule of happiness is don’t buy things; buy experiences. The market has taken one commodity product after another and turned it into an emotional experience—even hotel stays. I don’t know how you measure how much better off we are because of that, but we are significantly better off.

—David Brooks, “The Edamame Economy”‡

It is delusional to think that booking a stay in a boutique hotel automatically guarantees an experience advertised as being designed for its guests. The “edamame economy” is

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† Young, “Conjectures,” 348.
the old “package deal” economy repackaged and upsold. The customer pays more not for any particular experience but for the conviction that it will occur, as well as, to put it bluntly, the greater fuss around the actual choice (since there needs to be a “match” between it and the experience we want, or see ourselves as having).

The difference between the available options is that some (thanks to their price and so-called uniqueness) come attached with an imperative to make the most of it. So great is the expectation and commitment to making it special that even a one-night stay acquires the aura of a one-night stand on a tropical holiday. But as in so many other areas of production that have figured out how to exploit consumers, we are creating surplus value by signing an invisible contract with ourselves. To have an experience in the experience economy, to have one on demand, seems less preposterous and self-exploitative when that demand appears to come from, and that experience is guaranteed by, none other than us.

‡ Moratorium II

A I call for a moratorium on publishing so the average reader could catch up, thank you very much.

B No offence, my friend, but what a stupid idea! There is no such thing as an “average reader.” Clearly you don’t read enough —
§ Rip-Off

We learn that animals learn by mimicry. This means that writers are always learning. But ours is an age when even mimicry is in decline. Why not rip covers off of entire books and put new names on them? They are already doing it over in China. Increasingly that is the only way a book (a thesis, etc.) will get read. Let me put it to you this way, dear writer: would you rather your work be shared and read under a different author, or never read again? No self-respecting communist would oppose such a redistribution of intellectual property.

§ Meterocracy

In the fairest possible world, virtue would be rewarded, as would merit of any kind. Recognition of merit is our world’s moral response to rampant capitalism. Does the widespread criticism of the use of metrics and quantification of achievement in nearly all aspects of life indicate that meritocracy is part of the bad world that needs to be overcome, or does it merely tell us that the measurement of man is hardly less crude than it was some hundred-plus years ago?
A Wide Selection

The process of social screening and selection is there no matter how far back we look. It is there in adolescence, in the playground, in the sandbox... It occurs in the background until suddenly we not only feel the pain of having been passed over for someone not obviously better, more charismatic, more accomplished than us; we also begin more soberly to consider our odds, to question the decision’s fairness, to look at the patterns and, finally, the bases of social exclusion and acceptance. Such experiences, when their outcomes are not to our liking, acquire the bitter flavour of existential sorting, not just into the favoured and the rejected, but, in the latter group, into those who are paralyzed by their awareness of it being so, those who persevere in spite of it, and those who fight it—sometimes until late middle age. The mid-life crisis, made grim by resentment of systemic discrimination, has its analogue in the adolescent period of rebellion against social norms that loom as obstacles to self-realization, expression, freedom and equality, justice and fairness for all. A period of adjustment in behaviour and expectations may or may not follow. The memory of departing from norms, of going off the rails that first time, tends to be mythologized because misunderstood. As for the second time, mid-life, depending on your social integration, it can be a source of severe embarrassment. Whether you ever get back on track or not, you have arrived. Should you one day come out, it will be much reduced in spirit.
Outside the Text

We should stop pretending that general-interest books (and I don’t mean picture books) are judged solely on the merit of what is inside them, and that the social background of a book, its cultural context, and how it came into being, come into play in only the most obvious literary feats and are irrelevant outside of special interest. We claim to read masterpieces that happen to be prison writing, collectively authored, or the posthumously published work of a suicide—unless they are masterpieces of prison writing, feats merely of collective authorship, or of a suicidal mind. We say that such information only adds to our appreciation of a true work of literature (Dostoevsky’s gambling-driven productions readily spring to mind) even for the cases where that is manifestly untrue. Like the proverbial cover, all that extraneous stuff, we maintain, can never be the main reason for admiring a book—or for redeeming it. Yet clearly the greater share of the enormous appeal of a novel about overcoming addiction, A Million Little Pieces, was not only its Book Club controversy, but its origin in the mind of an addict, at the site of addiction overcome.
§ Doubling Standard

The idea that we should all feel addressed by the books we read, that this is how books should be for us to elevate them to “universal” masterpieces of “human” ingenuity, is very powerful. We should pray that it soon becomes passé. It is like saying that all humans should be explicitly and promiscuously social to count as great, for us to find them worthy of honour; otherwise their humanity is flawed, there is something wrong with them — some moral failing, the paralogism of writing publicly while not caring — for which we don’t forgive them, but instead mark them down.

The exception to this powerful and widespread view of literature is the outsider writer, equivalent of the outsider artist in name though not in number. His work, contrariwise, many are prepared to elevate above the best writers, and high above their own heads. But they are okay with such cluelessness. They don’t hold it against the writer but instead reach out to him, pitying one so shut out.

§ The Candid Philosopher

Shall we steal a line from that now-fashionable philosopher and say, next time, Let’s all collaborate!? Thinking together is so much more fun — and optimistic.
For reasons of technological possibility and economic efficiency, collective authorship no longer means collaboration. More often than not, it gives rise to a collective instead of proceeding from it. It is the product of environments and milieus; decisions to co-author are less and less decisions, and more a mix of logical steps and professional jerk reactions. To keep up appearances, much is made of networking as “talking shop,” as though collaboration was alive and kicking.

For reasons of cultural degradation and endangerment, collaboration no longer implies collective authorship. More often than not, it takes the form of working loosely side by side. It is the product of garrisoned scenes and threatened ecosystems; co-thinking and co-doing are safeguards less of concord or conformity than of group survival. To keep up appearances, much is made of not going it alone, as though collective authorship was part of the job description.

The risks of ruining one’s prospects for literary greatness are such that, in the making of a literary auteur no less than of a literary author, they can only be reduced by contracting oneself as one’s own ghostwriter, to whom any and all complaints should in future be directed.

§ Ghosting Oneself
Publish and Perish?

But there is something else about the genre, a sense that the world might be more ghosted now than at any time in history. Isn’t Wikipedia entirely ghosted? Isn’t half of Facebook? Isn’t the World Wide Web a new ether, in which we are all haunted by ghostwriters?

—Andrew O’Hagan

Perhaps the only release from the tyranny of genius and the competitive spirit of capitalism is to appear in print only as a ghost, with an unidentifiable body and untrackable series of avatars. But who can resist the temptation to be recognized behind our multiple names, ostensibly meant to put false followers off our scent, when our hangers-on still claim our attention without deserving it and with another hand demand from us a piece of ID? We think, often rightly, Better do it myself, in case they get it wrong, and throw off our cloak of anonymity, presenting our work publically for identification (calling it our calling card, to indicate that the opportunity to get to know us was missed).

While difficult to trace, we want nonetheless to be sought and found—like a needle in a haystack—by our sharp point. The prospect of perishing in a field fire or ending up in the stomach of some ruminant is as unappealing as the search for genius and the spirit of competition are maddening—a characteristic of charades that have gone on too long, and of the world shrunk into a parlour.

* O’Hagan, “Ghosting.”
Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Nazis but Were Too Lazy to Find Out

“Overstuffed suitcase of a book,” wrote one critic of The Kindly Ones. But not the kind you should live out of.

Uncontaminated

You can eat off even the filthiest books.
Wiggle Room; or, the Unhappy Customer

_Literature wriggles away like an eel. What would become of the eel if you caught it? You’d eat it. Literature and the eel live as long as they succeed in wriggling away._

—Witold Gombrowicz*

Some prose, as someone once said, is so tasty you could eat it by the ladle. The main ingredients of the literary dish are words. You place your order, you take the first bite, yet as so often it is not to your liking. You have two options: either you can season it liberally to taste with what you have in front of you, or, just as easily, you can go to complain to the cooks. But if this dish happens to be an _eel_ (and sometimes all you dream of is electric fish), then you are out of luck. You have only yourself to blame for not sticking your fork into it quickly enough to prevent it eluding you—which it will do even dead. Too slow to grasp, you have nothing to show the chef, who in exasperation is liable to offer a second helping…

Never ever, however, blame the waitress who brought it to you. She has neither prepared nor tried it. You cannot have a word with this waitress; she is not responsible for the quality of the food—and besides, she leaves immediately to attend to another table. No matter how much you wish now that she had tasted your meal and, better still, sent it back before it reached you, if you are anything like her usual customers she has every reason not to care about your satisfaction. You too soon learn to look past her and throw furious glances in the direction of the kitchen, eventually taking your complaint there if you are firm, which is entirely within your rights as consumer. You know as well as I do what the staff will say: although the _carte_ came with recommendations, you chose neither a house specialty, nor a fresh daily special, but, craving surprises, a _chef’s fantasia_. You thought first of ordering the tasting menu, but worried it might leave you...

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hungry, or else its variety would have been too much for your sensitive stomach. And then, after you made your choice, there was the inordinate wait—but in such establishments you half-expect this. You certainly, however, did not plan for disappointment. You felt your appetite grow—even so, you resisted pulling out a (“good bad”) sandwich from your briefcase, in anticipation of more recherché fare.

So what made you come to this place? Was it the five-star reviews by those with too much time to spend or more refined taste? By now you have guessed it: the “dish” is a novel with literary pretensions; the “cooks,” the author and editor; the staff and joint, a bookstore, kept alive by undiscriminating user-critics. But what, might I ask, are you doing here?

§

Token of Value

Every work is born failed until it is redeemed by being published. There exists a type of literary product that is irredeemable, insofar as redemption happens only through publishing. The work ignored by the publishing industry, a text no one would risk picking up, is a text forsaken, and with it the writer. So goes the old understanding.

But publishing no longer has the power to redeem. It has been discovered as the reverse of the coin that bears the words NO CASH VALUE. By publishing your book, you have merely obtained a token, for which you can play (for a limited time) to distract yourself from your flaws as a writer, but which is irredeemable outside your world of publishing.
§ Life of a Writer

The hustle and bustle of authors around their work may be slow for a road to ruin, but eventually it gets the job done.

§ Literary Public Execution

No scaffold is too elevated for a writer’s execution. He has come into being as a public figure, and it is only fitting that he be helped to die as one.

§ Public Service

Parole is “the release of a prisoner temporarily (for a special purpose) or permanently before the completion of a sentence, on the promise of good behaviour” (OED).

Prisoners of their writing, writers would do everyone a service to serve out their sentences without parole. They do not need to speak about them or, for that matter, to hand them out to others.

With more time, and themselves as models for how to “do” time metaphorically, they could then turn the odious literal practice of life imprisonment into a metaphor.

Failing that, the public might write off the last of their sentence as one writes off a debt. And depending on whom you ask, this “write off” may mean “forgive” or “dismiss.” At issue is not whether achieving greater social justice is what the writer owes us in his prison cell, but whether he has spent his time writing well. And good writing is best done without parole.
§ Vital Injection

A more satisfying alternative to capital punishment has appeared on the horizon of possibility: in place of the death penalty, a life sentence with an indefinite life-extension. More humane perhaps, but less human.

“Life will be hard,” the lifer might then say, unaware that his forerunner, the failed regicide Damiens, said something similar of the *day* of his drawing and quartering.

(This option was first spied in an aphorism,* and brought to life in a popular TV-series, Black Mirror, not long ago. Even aphorisms can have their life extended by becoming literalisms. This, again, being better punishment than the penalty of death.)

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§ Complete Sentences

“We no longer execute people for saying the wrong word. Instead we hand them life sentences.”

“We no longer persecute people for their opinions. We ignore them. There’s no question which is worse.”

“With so many distractions vying for our attention, capital punishment is not the attraction it once was.”

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Essential Killing

It has been pointed out that the Great Revolution democratized a good part of the French body politic by means of the guillotine, a mode of death formerly reserved for nobles. Those who lost their heads were made more equal by popular judgment, and equality was felt all around.

So we show our humanity even in the very process of annihilating those presumed human (by falling under the law). The guillotine and the electric chair, each in its own iconic way, served to make the point: the first through equality, the second through mercy. Beneath the guillotine all are given the same democratic treatment, cut down to the new universal size, undeserving of republican brotherhood yet made its beneficiaries. Similarly, the electric chair and then lethal injection came to be defensible means of disposing of those enemies of the state who do not deserve public empathy yet become its recipients.

While both apparatuses were invented as humanitarian concessions, they are in many ways opposites. The one achieved in precision and efficiency what the other gained in dignity and solemnity. The bloodthirsty ruthlessness of the show of equality is in no way inferior to the execution chamber’s antiseptic chill. Still, each made methodical killing respectable, testifying to the humanity not just of the executioners but of all of society in a way that the law alone could never do. Until we come up with a solution that does not kill, we will continue to show our humanity to those who have least use for it.
Completists

*Accused Killer Was Victim’s Pallbearer One Week after Brutal Slaying*
—headline in *The Calgary Herald*, March 26, 2014

There are some for whom it is not enough to murder someone; they cannot stop themselves from seeing them off as well. It is then not, or no longer, a case of sadism (since their victim cannot feel anything) but of completism. We are prepared to forgive a murderer, but a completist—never.

Happy Day

*bonheur du jour: small writing desk, French eighteenth century*

Often a desk is not the place to write. This became clear long ago, before the age of laptop computing. But the joy of returning to one and the same spot, one and the same stable surface, in order to pursue what one has begun, is the joy of knowing that one will continue until one is done. It is the experience of completion.
§ Once a Wolf, Always a Wolf?

*Goodwill is turned to ill will by the violence it suffers.*
—Adorno and Max Horkheimer*

Instead of having your children passively accept the unsullied goodness and badness of characters in fairy tales, there may be more pedagogical value in asking them to reimagine these characters, building on the above rule: to imagine the good ones corrupted by violence and malice, the bad ones converted to goodness by decency, charity, and kindness. The danger in this exercise is that children, being so impressionable, will turn away from the world, with its unpredictable violence, to protect their own good natures. Yet isn’t that same danger hidden in their fear that the world is full of unalterable violence, of proverbial wolves in sheep’s attire who can never be mollified by goodwill?

§ On a Roll

How we *love* reversals! It is as with rolling downhill when one realizes the ground has levelled out enough that to continue will require a new commitment and effort. But as long as you keep that up, heaven shall follow earth with every turn.

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*Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 214.*
§ Nodding Acquaintance

A What if someone you met every day, to the best of your knowledge an ordinary person, suddenly said to you, in an elevator, “All people… are bound, by their very nature, to be criminals.”

B I would be surprised. I would look at the person more closely, when they weren’t looking. I would remember the remark every time I saw the person. If it was often, I might even lose my peace of mind.

A So you would or wouldn’t credit his remark? It seems you would suspect him of having uttered a promise, rather than an accusation (of you, for instance) or a statement of fact.

B I suppose I would recognize the truth of his words, but only as concerns other people.

A Including himself.

B Yes, including himself. Bizarre casual comments are often self-incriminating.

A And your own judgment would now tend towards this—incriminating others, I mean. His statement made it a rational direction for you to consider, even if the position itself is not reasonable.

B I suppose. But it isn’t like I have nothing better to do. Only that uninitiated contact with strangers makes me think “Here’s trouble.”

A Why would you not say to the person precisely that: “Your remark rings true whenever a stranger makes a curious, unsolicited remark to me. My first thought is: ‘Here’s trouble.”

B I would never do that.

A Why?

B Because it would be rude and dangerous to let on that I’m suspicious. That all it took to make me uncomfortable was a seemingly innocent, offhand remark. It would make me look cowardly, and cowardice is weakness, and weakness provokes, and it is defenceless against crime . . .

A But by replying that way you would be making light of your discomfort and perhaps preempting unwanted behaviour. What would you rather do?

B Nod. Nod and think: “Go to hell, if it will even take you.”

A That’s a mean thought. It implies you have already judged the person guilty of some crime. Did their words cause you any offence? Don’t you think you are overreacting?

B No. I was rehearsing Sartre’s line about hell being other people. * I meant: “Stick to likeminded people.”

A So although you think there is truth in what he said, you would not call yourself “likeminded”?

B No.

A Why is that?

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Because I think better of people. Better in the sense that, even if they are criminals at heart, or, as you say, “by nature,” they will not let their criminals out. They will not become criminals by deed or law, only at most in their mind, in their imagination. They might rehearse crimes all their lives but leave them undone. And this “outlet” will satisfy their need for aggression.

But they will remain criminals “by nature,” will they not? So in that sense there is no difference between your view and the view expressed earlier.

Oh but there is. I think better of people because I think they can change, become better people. The criminal who can discipline their mind will cease to be a criminal “by nature.”

Do you extend this fulsome optimism to the person in the elevator?

Not really.

Why not?

Because he lost the benefit of the doubt by making the comment. Or rather, his comment suggests that his imagination is up to no good. It is evidence that he may be a criminal at heart who cannot contain his criminal inclinations.

I see. By “likeminded people” you meant such people.

Yes. And such people I would rather keep as nodding acquaintances. To such people I would say nothing. The efficacy of words is overrated. I would not reply for fear of interrupting an already fragile effort by which they might be reining in their impulses. I don’t want to provoke them, I do not wish to stand in their way, I have no desire to be noticed, to appear on their sensitive radars. I want to
be the mirror they want me to be. To nod would be to indicate that I accept this—this function—but nothing more. Nodding could leave open the possibility that I too harbour criminal thoughts or intentions, however uncomfortable this makes me feel. A nod can be a sign of complicity.

To accept that “hell is other people” is to allow these *un-likeminded* people to imagine I think like them—and that together we make up hell. To let them think their criminal dreams have company, and that it is OK—and more fulfilling—to keep dreaming. Because a reality in which everyone turned to crime, the *real* hell, would be deeply disappointing.

A And all this can be suggested with a mere *nod*?

B Yes, a nod and nothing more. A nod without a look; why complicate the message?

§ Black Leather

With the refinement of middle-class taste, the latex gloves of the butcher and fish-vendor have gone from white to black. Which is to say *from clean to dirty*, for those out of sync with the times. Or *from blood-stained to sexy*, for the aesthetically minded younger generation whose first association is with leather. The few folks in whom the sight of blood on black leather might stir unpleasant memories will not be around for much longer now.
§ Counterproductive

A Security Bulletin on a college campus gave detailed descriptions of three armed robbers: their sex, age, height, build, dress, and distinguishing facial features. If what was missing is their colour, are we expected to assume? And if we are, how does this combat racial stereotyping?

§ Ripple Effect

How can we explain our reaction to sexual acts that turn murderous, as they do routinely in the works of Sade, which so many find unpalatable? The combination of pleasure and cruelty is as deplorable and uncomfortable-making as the alliance of power and cruelty is unsurprising and comfortably far away. Despite the appeal of erotic sadism and masochism in the culture, sexual gratification and torture or murder do not mix well in film or literature. We are awash with safe and sanitized depictions of even mildly transgressive sexuality, figured as consent-based fantasy role-play—a line that the pairing of voluptuousness with brutality seems destined to cross, as we know from reading the paper. Sex plus wantonness seems for many too common, too close to home, and thus too unpleasant to think about, let alone merit artistic treatment, which so often glamourizes or aestheticizes what should be (is) feared as a real threat.

Meanwhile, modern power, in the hands of citizens, remains innocuous. For one thing, power has been uncoupled here from faith-based cruelty long ago. Christianity (which has long since abandoned its militant mission), Mormonism, etc. are being scrubbed clean even of sexual abusiveness, and may yet undo their orthodox repressions completely. (The cuddly libido, symbolized by the sex kitten and the Playboy Bunny, looks to soon have its equivalent in the huggable Church of Pope Francis, purged of its closeted skeletons.)
the hands of secular dictators and religious fundamentalists elsewhere in the world, however, power is as in the bad old days: bloody and clumsy, pathetic, occasionally appalling and exotic. Wherever in the world power and cruelty are still close, or grow to be inseparable, their alliance seems surreal and unthreatening, and in any event rarely news. Unless, that is, it shows its sexual roots (witness Boko Haram). While unbridled religious fervor is recognized as powerful enough to explain and even justify bloodshed, the pursuit of pleasure does not have the same validity because it is widely believed to be obtainable without violence. In as permissive a culture as our own, we feel, sex offenders have no more excuse.

Power, whether religious or secular, here or elsewhere, still carries the hint of domination, tyranny, and atrocity. This dark side finds an outlet in the outrages of our foreign wars, but it is always excused as an exception, as the rot of a few isolated apples, malicious, sadistic, or simply too stupid to know better. When real power is over many, its abuses are systemically distributed and, in all but the egregious cases, tend to escape detection. But in power over just one or relatively few, as in the case of sects, slaves kept in basements, concentration camp inmates, and war prisoners (as in Abu Ghraib ca. 2003), the sexual core becomes hard to miss—and take. We recoil from the sight, even the thought. By comparison, mass terror, beheadings, stonings, and crucifixions attract because the methods used to maintain power are too archaic for us to properly fathom, and because our good governments do much to publicize such images. Their repressed eroticism is as far from our minds as they themselves are far away. We read such seemingly unadulterated power-trip stories with a firm sense of pity for the victims, uncomplicated by envy, perhaps with renewed commitment to fighting the world’s ignorance. From the other kind of story—of domination coupled with cruel eros—we are kept less by our naivety than by a deep fear of anarchy. Since once we acknowledge the intimate ties between, not just sex and criminal violence, but lust and religious and other tyranny where we previously did not see them, all power—not just the exotic, but the familiar also—will become too licentious to bear.
§ Sleepless

It is easy to make sleep as boring as possible on film, but difficult to bore spectators to sleep without them noticing it. Not only are their eyes well trained, but they are also used to watchfulness.

§ Almost

I am back from a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. At almost the same time yesterday I left the cinema, having just seen *Son of Saul*, a tunnel-vision rendering of life in Auschwitz. What more is there to say? That the famous performance of the Ninth under the direction of Wilhelm Furtwängler to mark the anniversary of him whom Thomas Mann, as a German, was compelled, on the eve of World War Two, to recognize as his “brother”—that this performance took place *almost* two months after the Wannsee Conference? It is thanks to this “*almost,*” to this inexactitude, that we do not suffocate beneath the weight of numbers.

§ At the Concession Stand

Cheer up! The markets are down today.
§ Discount on Top

[SALE PRICE]

*bargain not included*


§ “Friends for Life”

Everyone has gotten at least one of these pledges— in an email or scribbled on the back of a postcard after a pleasant time together. They are products of impulse. They announce two things at once: a strong desire to remember you just as you were, still fresh in the other’s mind, and the anticipation of a longer parting, for objective but often also subjective reasons— forgoing contact is known to preserve in amber that consummate experience. If it can be arranged, the parting will almost invariably prove the more lasting the more pleasure was actually had. Even permanent. So I always keep these pledges of friendship “for life” to return eventually to their senders, releasing them from a flippant commitment. After all, what are friends for life for? Let’s not be sentimental. Once embarrassment fades, the vow can always be renewed.
§ *Amicitia aequalitas*

You can tell true friends by their natural synchrony in ending their friendship, rather than by their painful growing apart. Their deep mutual familiarity, emotional attunement—the highest quality of amity uniting them—allow them also to move on as though spontaneously, simultaneously in unspoken agreement. Such a parting is always amicable because it is accepted without hard feelings and nary a word by both parties, who in a single cast go from personal friends to upstanding members of civil society, where they remain closer than strangers though farther apart than brethren.
§ Safety Deposits

Thieves need banks to deposit their stash without accounting for it. This to keep it from being stolen by others like them. They need banks more than those who have nothing to hide and who never mistrust regular banking, which requires transparency at least on the client’s part. The tension between thief and bank that culminates at the safety deposit box derives from, but is inversely proportionate to, the money or monetary value of the stolen object in need of protection. The fungibility of commodities ensures that a thief approaching a bank will feel like a murderer returning to the scene of the crime. Not out of compulsion or in fear of having left traces there or on his stash that could link them to the act, but in a punishing nightmare (free of remorse) and out of resignation to being forever tethered to his misdeed. Humiliation seems unavoidable: what is stolen from society must be deposited again into its hands, and this in the most official and scrutinized of institutions. As long as those who operate outside the law do so only selectively, and rely on doing their banking or other business that might shine a light on their livelihood, they remain more vulnerable than you or I. The sense of autonomy they acquire in operating outside legality is sapped as soon as they return to check on their loot.
§ Sexual Root of Kleptomania

If the first book one steals without having read, based on name and title alone, is Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is Freud proven right, or wrong?

§ Una harum ultima

There are dreams that prove Freud right, but only by proving him wrong. These are the dreams in which lust and death near-coincide, and *eros* is intensified by the proximity of *thanatos*. A cliché in art as much as in life, intense and until now forbidden sexual desire on the lip of death loses its staleness and implausibility only in the drama of the dream. Such dreams combine the intensity of the first encounter with the last. To die when one is most alive to pleasure and death — could one ask for a death better than this *dream death*, in which the last hour, not seen coming, is stretched by desire as long as it will last?

§ On Edge

Assisting in labour is as taxing as keeping vigil by the dying. At each moment, the first threatens death, the second promises recovery.
§ Pale as Death

The expression “white as a sheet” makes more sense than its variation, “white as a ghost,” for describing extreme palleness. The sight of the overlay of a white face by a white sheet, as still happens when a bedsheet is pulled over the face of someone who has just passed away, brings out its ghastly aptness. After such an encounter, a white sheet could never look the same again. One woman who witnessed the passing of her mother replaced all the tablecloths in her house. Being a waitress, however, she is reminded of death on the job. Is this how death haunts us, and why so many ghosts appear clad in sheets?

§ Moored

The umbilical cord is exactly the length of the unconscious, which stretches back and down through the mother, through the mother’s mother, and so on, to the matrix of motherhood. Neither yanking on nor cutting it—aggravating and symbolic actions—will suffice to free us from what ties us down for life.
§ Angel of Death

Recollection of an encounter ten winters ago, on a bus ride to a rundown area of the city: sitting across from me was a man in his mid-thirties wearing a cap with a skull-and-bones pinned to the front, in the best Nazi style. The articles looked original and the thought—I am sitting directly across from an original Panzer side cap with a Totenkopf pin, as worn by the panzer division of the SS from the 1930s until the end of the war—sent my mind reeling. I stared at the cap, then at the extraordinary face of the man flaunting it, then at the rest of his getup, and found that it was just so and of a piece: a faded quilted jacket with an old leather belt tightened around the waist, worn burlap trousers rolled up to display his polished old jackboots. I took in the entire package, noting the effort it took to achieve, now trying to make some sense of it: Sitting across from me is a replica of a German off to the Eastern front to commit God knows what crimes. What is he doing here dressed like this? Something in his demeanor convinced me he was no actor on his way to the set.

I continued to scrutinize him. He had ash-blond hair, pale blue eyes, a fair complexion, and disarmingly “Aryan” features. His face was freshly shaven, a ghost of razor burn adding to its rawness and manliness. He was handsome. I sought to make eye contact, but he stared off into space with an eerily absent expression. Blood rushed to my head more rapidly now. There must be a way, I thought, of getting amazement, antagonism, and indignation across the metre or so separating me from this apathetic angel, and get him to meet my combative and withering gaze. He stared on fixedly, yet his body was not what one might call soldier-rigid, suggesting he was beyond performance, felt himself authentic enough, secure in his identity, well-bonded with his “look,” his period costume by now a second skin. Did the relative sartorial understatement—aside from the quietly baleful “death’s head,” he had on him no insignia, no armband, no obnoxious accessories—have to do with his affinity with Nazi soldiers rather than Nazi criminals? Or were withering
social taboos all that held him back from donning the “real,” all-out garb of an SS officer?

As the bus pulled into the station at the end of the line, I took a tactical position and, passing him, ran my shoulder into his—instantly realizing, however, that my puniness may have left the wrong impression (of an accident, not deliberate aggression). Fearing cowardice and loss of composure, with shame already coming on, I turned around to give him one final look with all the urgency I could muster. But his placid face, now turned to me, only confronted me with my own impotence in the face of the angels’ ignorance and unfeeling when it comes to human affairs.

Some months later I saw the man again. He wore the same or very similar clothing and struck me afresh as quite beautiful and dignified. He was walking alone at a measured pace, smiling to himself, sunlight on his face, and stopped beside a small, towheaded boy lingering behind his mother. He must have noted the resemblance between himself and the kid, since he addressed him with obvious affection. Then he continued on his way. The boy looked on admiringly, brimming with pride, feeling lucky to have been the object of such attention and swooping guardianship. At that moment, the innocence of neither could be doubted, but they were innocent in very different ways.

§ À la chienlit!

As mortality goes the way of all flesh, the only death will be social, and nothing worse than it.
Pierre Tombale

“My life? Laisse tomber, drop it! Let it fall with the force of a gravestone.”

The Origins of Work

The first self-assigned work, something that had to be done and planned (depending on its level of difficulty), was self-preservation or the preservation of dependents. Only once these tasks had been partially relieved by coordinated effort and planning could work become an occupation. A choice was made to specialize in a craft or trade or profession, the gains from which could be used to secure (other) wants and necessities. The occupation was practiced to the exclusion of most other communal labour (excepting harvest, war, response to acts of God), and, in the face of growing competition, the more single-mindedly, the better. And so we have arrived at a point in history where, society being ever more complex and populous, there is on the one hand considerable choice in occupations and, on the other, the freedom to create them, using one’s ingenuity to discern or divine unmet needs and turn a profit—and to reinvent oneself should those needs decline.

This latter freedom is reflected on the level of sociolect in the silencing of that outmoded question “What do you do for a living?” by temporary and/or highly particular occupational designators (especially in administration and the service and creative industries) and by an additive approach, concealing a history of often precarious employment marketed as a roster of transferable and special skills, and suggesting ever new possibilities of employment (e.g., gopher-turned-lighting technician-photographer-filmmaker-author-curatorial-critic-…). In both cases—the ultra-specialized and the certified jack-of-all-trades—a simple answer to the question
“What do you do for a living?” is impossible, and if it does get asked, it is with, if not instant regret, then genuine interest in the addressee.

If such work is less satisfying than the work of our ancestors—the ur-work, so to speak—if, when we pause to reflect, it resembles play, this is because it is of radically lesser importance to anyone, including ourselves. The newfound feeling of weightlessness masks the fear of uselessness, which is revealed in the pursuit of celebrity. It is not vanity but anxiety that speaks, with vicious repetitiveness, through the perpetual insecurity of seekers of public attention. It is the sensation, existentially fatal, of a cork bobbing upon the fathomless waters of society, contributing nothing to its own support. The freedom of leisure and pleasure is predicated on the fact that we are no longer preserving life, and those whose job is still not so removed that they can claim to be really preserving it would find our work vacuous, unrewarding, and parasitic. We may find comfort in the thought of mere survival as a life not worth living (the unexamined life, the life of labour, bare life, etc.). Yet the undertow of such an ideology of free social existence continually recalls us to the standard of preservation, which started it all.

§

Apply Within

Competition for paid work divides society into those who “made it” and those who didn’t, into winners and losers. The line between them is as objectively clear as it is distinct in the minds of individuals. Regardless on which side they find themselves, they accept the prevailing norm that, for virtually any job, losers need not apply.
§ Among the Living

To be fully among the living is to mourn from time to time. Tears and lamentation at the graveside are the groans of life magnified by the proximity to death's tranquility. In grief at separation can be discerned a grievance against the length of a life—much too brief, long enough though it is to outlive many who make it meaningful for us. As long as death still remains, as Adorno and Horkheimer put it, continuous with life, loss will be mourned, and mourners accept that any posthumous remembrance of someone they have lost merely continues remembering them while they were still alive. By this it is clear that they have not progressed to equating death with nothingness (of which the instant forgetting of the dead, retained only as archival images and voices, would be an indubitable sign, and from which the horizon where death has ceased to exist can almost be glimpsed). Transition to posthumous care for the dead, whether in the form of remembrance or visits, actual or symbolic, to their actual or symbolic place of rest, is easier for those who had cared actively for the now departed; continuity of habit ensures the link between life, however weak, and death. As for the rest, assuming a new responsibility with an emphasis on loss, rather than on the lost one’s archival preservation or retrieval, combines with effort to assert their own aliveness vis-à-vis the dead—an effort that, paradoxically, saps their élan vital. Once the dead are blamed for this loss in vitality, the mourner enters a period of self-mourning, for that part of themselves that has been sacrificed to the deceased and that death has already, in effect, taken from them. The self-mourner may well be reconciled to their own demise, though—as more and more is wrested from them through the exertions of a double mourning—it will still come as an unwelcome surprise.

§ No Posthumous Reproach

A drama of regret and reproach is a drama of dying, whether or not a death actually follows. Bergman only gives us the latter once the former has been exhausted, culminating in the impossible whispered cry of a deceased woman to her nurse that reflects the deepest hopes and fears of her two surviving sisters: “I’m dead, you see. The trouble is I can’t get to sleep. I can’t leave you all.”* Her lifeless face is the true face of the philosopher, and her late and egoistical cry—in which death’s sense of “the possibility of impossibility” coincides with that of “the impossibility of possibility”†—becomes the clearest statement of the Heideggerian-Lévinasian ethic: the ego never is, the face of the other is only seen in death, making of reproachful life a signal failure to hold on to either.

§ Wound Man

A sixteenth-century book of woodcut prints, Feldtbuch der Wundartzney (Wound-Doctor’s Field-Book), a manual on military surgery, left us perhaps the most evocative because incredibly compact depiction of the physical traumas that to this day can accidentally assail our bodies. The Wound-Man, a human pin-cushion pierced by knives, arrows, spears and swords on every side, which, implausibly multiplied, lodged and suspended, appear as instruments not of war but of torture, hurts externally as much as the Man of Sorrows, who took upon himself the sins of the world, suffers internally.

* Viskningar och rop (Cries and Whispers), directed by Ingmar Bergman (1972; New York City, NY: The Criterion Collection, 2001), DVD.
§ The Jargon of Inauthenticity

authentic: from Hellenistic Greek authentikós (αὐθεντικός), “warranted, original, authoritative,” from authentia (αὐθεντία), “authority,” from ancient Greek authentēs (αὐθέντης), “perpetrator, one who does things himself”

authenticity: a mode of existence which has its basis in self-awareness, critical reflection on one’s goals and values, and responsibility for one’s own actions; condition of being true to oneself (OED)

A Authenticity is never direct, never primary. Its name is a pointer, a signpost, and its meaning lies not down the road, but round the bend, over the river, and through the woods. Being true to oneself requires endless detours.

B You mean to say that it is not readily accessible, not within easy reach? That the direct route in front of us is a test—a shortcut not to authenticity, but to being disqualified as inauthentic?

A Authenticity requires that we “stray” from established paths, even if we ultimately end up in the same place we would have had we done nothing but follow them. And even though authenticity cannot actually be achieved, even indirectly, we do get “closer” to it. The meaningfulness of “being authentic” depends on its elusiveness and even loss. Indirection in approaching authenticity mirrors the convoluted route along which authenticity was gradually lost.

B Perhaps it was never lost and for that reason cannot be found again. Perhaps it will not have been found even when the concept of “being authentic” is lost. This loss will mean neither that it has become redundant because we have become authentic nor that we have passed some point of no return to authenticity. Its forgetting
could only mean anything if the concept itself was not forgotten…

A We will be done with authenticity only by its meaningless forgetting—or by replacing it with the jargon of inauthenticity. Then we can look forward to clarity about authenticity, since the positive term, which inauthenticity would have become, is always the one plagued by vagueness—more stake claims to its definition! Beside God, the Devil will always be a simple cartoon.

§ Wild Oats

How can you expect me to give our friendship a chance when you could not give our romance a chance, quick to judge me unsuitable as a partner in the most unpropitious circumstances during our time together? Do you expect me to go against my feelings and hope they will follow? You seem adamant that there exists a fluid boundary between friendship and love, at least in some relationships (like ours). I share your view. Friendship and love are not incompatible, and in some cases (like ours) become entwined from the start. So to now separate them like wheat from chaff would be an unnatural procedure that does violence to the plant to make it edible and yielding. The “chaff” would always grow back around the grain once the seeds are sown.

In wild cereal—cereal not so domesticated that it cannot regenerate itself without cultivation—the distinction between chaff and wheat does not apply. The toil of sowing, reaping, and threshing is not needed for it to grow.
When I die, I am sure to be remembered fondly by those few whose thoughts would alight on me from time to time. They might think I was quite the piece of work; a real loose cannon; kind; regret never having been my friend; feel privileged to have known me; miss my sense of humour; my old soul—no wonder I died so young! But fond memories are not love.

How many of us who want love badly, and get it not, go early into death to find it? Even if I died a tragic death, others’ love for me, though stronger, would not be of the kind I had wished to inspire. It would be love for a memory, a love for what they have made of me—a description to which I wouldn’t answer—a love I could not even reciprocate; deep down, a self-love. The love of those who failed to love me while I could still wriggle out of their grip, of those who would claim to have loved me despite my faults and the slights I caused them—unconditionally—now that I was without condition. And such revisionist tarrying, as long as I live, I cannot allow. I cling to life as long as I can to keep such love at bay.

But they assure me: You have nothing to worry about. Why fret over how we’ll treat you after you drop dead? Why meddle with our work? Embalming in memory is hard as it is. But I object to this as well. Do you mean, I say, that you would not consider my present worries when preserving me? I hope that by telling you now I can prevent some blatant misuses of my posthumous person. But they frown on my micro-managerial tendencies: Planning your own funeral, leaving disposal instructions—isn’t that enough? Of all my post-obit affairs, I reply, those are the least important! They are over and done with before you know it, everyone moves on from mourning in a matter of days. But that still leaves years for exhuming and reburying me through reminiscence. Have you no consideration for how I want to be remembered, let alone loved? Your indifference and barely contained laughter suggest you do not. And that suggests in turn that you love me not. In that case, I am a fool to worry so much. If I have
not inspired your love when still alive, I am certain not to do so after I am gone. All I can hope for is to grow on you. And that, I must say—having heard you on love—is now a much better proposition.

§ Between Stiff and Statue

Physical love is the desire to be as near as possible to both aspects of the beloved body at once: to touch it at its weakest, most emaciated, most ruined by disease or age and threatening to crumble into dust and, at the same time, to be embraced by the body triumphant over time, fleshly and muscular, firm as veined marble or alabaster, preserved for eternity, as in an hourglass laid on its side.

§ Love & Love-Sickness

B Melancholy is no match for love when the latter is already burning.

A Love that burns is no match for melancholy. Love-sickness does not catch. It seizes.
§ *Incipit vita nova*

The other, perverse side of the triumphant fatalism of *Liebestod*, which befalls star-crossed mortals in love who cannot live without each other, is the fatal triumphalism of love and survival available to vampire lovers. With every shared victim, death is averted and new life begins for the bloodsucking couple, whose love, so ancient, must be amoral and heartless to last as it does, avoiding the fate of Dante and Beatrice, whose new life began only once, before it ended. Vampiric suicide, though flirted with, is not an option; they are fated to kill to live on. Their need for a good day’s rest (“We don’t want to be up all day”*) is the sensible side of passion for these immortal lovers, whom some have dared to call “Adam” and “Eve.” Living from victim to victim, time and again they come close to death in a world that denies their very existence. And each time they are relieved to see the other alive. For that reason alone, they remain *more* alive than mere “zombies,” which is to say — on an average bad day — than us.

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* *Only Lovers Left Alive*, directed by Jim Jarmusch (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2013), DVD.
Not a Peep from You

Some years back, not too long ago, a young British singer from a good family found herself pursued by a lovesick young Englishman. The chap had gone to great lengths to woo her (a 30-foot ash tree planted on her lawn for Valentine’s Day being only the most astonishing of his many overtures). Jude’s love, which Rebecca did not return, was focused on an attribute around which a love story could nowadays take shape only in a folk tale or opéra bouffe— for, if one takes tabloid reports at face value (as one must to “get” British society), it was a love of a bass voice for a soprano. That so sublime a love can escape ridicule by the crudest, most vulgar organs of public opinion is a sign that love still has deep, legitimizing roots in male romantic obsession, making instantly relatable and sympathetic what, when performed by a female, is—no two ways about it—morbid. The double standard for stalking, that quintessentially modern offence and signal of uncoupling male obsession from love, points however to a truth: the party who has our sympathy (the smitten man) is the true victim, a victim not of love but of the general decline of masculinity and the rise of female power. It is a fact belied—though not for much longer—by two canards of heterosexual rape culture, where masculinity finds refuge in physical power: (1) that there is no such thing as rape (all “victims” “ask” to be “raped”) and (2) that female-on-male rape does not exist (men are “made to penetrate”). The voice of the rapist does not sing of love.
§ Sex & Democracy

Love has reaped untold benefits in mature democratic societies. The institutionalization of the principles of liberty and equality includes, in its advanced form, both equality between bodies and the right to use one’s carcass as one pleases. The rules—and the rule—have shifted from the tired performances of masculinity as dominant and femininity as submissive to a balanced “contact of two epidermes”—a fine clinical phrase from eighteenth-century moralist extraordinaire Chamfort, contemporary of the Marquis de Sade, whose naturalist vision of a respublica sexualis is still too radical for our taste. The empire of sex has since been leveled out through a fair exchange of blows and bodily fluids, enshrined in sanitary conventions. Clean, safe fun; no one must get hurt. Conditions of physical engagement have also grown stricter: the self-control that comes with the territory of sexual play requires that the oversexed not tax their partners but instead seek outlets in pornography and masturbation—a now-widespread view inconceivable until very recently. And, lest we forget, the democratization of sex does not stop at workplace codes of conduct or even the bedroom, where it has made decisive inroads. So much so that even our fantasies sport sexy “model citizen” undies.
Making Conversation

Entrepreneurs like Esther Perel who have made a name for themselves speaking publically about sexuality, particularly in couples therapy, know. They know that the future of education, like many another capitalist enterprise—even that which, like psychoanalysis, limited to one-on-one interaction, does not always depend on revenue—lies in facilitating content-production instead of providing it oneself. The structure of investment, labour, and the creation of surplus value holds across the board, even if substance, inputs and outcomes differ in each particular case—even if labour and profit are distributed evenly and equally reinvested. (Non-starters and ephemeral undertakings are such precisely because they do not adopt this mode of organization, whose familiarity attracts interest and capital.) The surplus value of Esther Perel is not just the money she receives, but the work her audiences do to satisfy her and live up to her standards. The payoff for them is, in this case, not a credit or diploma, but the obvious satisfaction of having addressed the least productive aspect of their life—sexual activity—in a productive manner.
§ Romeos

And it should be known that correctly there are three titles for the people who go in the service of the Almighty: they are called palmers if they go overseas, since they often bring back palm leaves: they are called pilgrims if they go to the shrine of Saint James in Galicia, since the sepulchre of Saint James was further away from his country than any other apostle: they are called romeos if they go to Rome . . .

—Dante*

Love, for so long joined to faith and divorced from carnal pleasure, seemed fated to tip over into the secular and sexual. It is the distinction of Rome to have been both Babylon and home to God’s infallible interpreters.

§ Scale Models

There is nothing to open a droopy critical eye to the vices and follies of mankind like a change of scale. We tend to flatter ourselves too much in synthetic miniatures of ourselves: our flaws, small to begin with, become invisible, and all that’s left are our virtues—visible because we look for them, ineffective because so minuscule.

In children, however, our faults stand out like nowhere else. Orwell all but discovered this in Animal Farm. Vivian Maier, the street photographer, snapped it in the street. Two boys under ten doing business together on a sidewalk: one sitting forward in a chair, freckled, his left foot up, the other, shoe-black, kneeling just in front of him.

To Scale

*The trick is to scale these things back up to the dimensions of childhood.*

—Kraus

In the painting of Prince Felipe Prospero by court painter Diego Velázquez (1659) we see one of those portraits of small children so uncommon before 1750 once we exclude the infant held for centuries in a mother’s arms, identityless putti, and some comely adolescents. Among this relatively small number of canvasses one would find, as well, Lucas Cranach the Elder’s young prince and princess of Saxony (1510s), *Henry II as a Child* (c. 1523) by Jean Clouet, Hans Holbein the Younger’s Prince Edward (c. 1538), the sixteenth-century renditions of the Duke of Savoy’s children by Jan Kraeck (some even before they could stand), and Bronzino’s gallery of the young Medicis, the most memorable being the chubby two-year-old from about 1545.

Princes are no ordinary tots; secular images of little ones neither high-born nor of great fame (Mozart’s fate) are certainly much rarer. Children crop up in family portraits (Holbein’s family, from c. 1528, or Domenico Ghirlandaio’s *Portrait of Francesco Sassetti and His Son*, drawn in profile c. 1488). They might comprise elements of allegory and parable (*Old Man with a Young Child*, by the same). They often enlivened Northern European Baroque genre painting, from outdoor scenes (as in the *Winter Landscape* by Avercamp) to domestic and semi-domestic ones (Pieter Brueghel the Elder, Jan Steen, and Pieter de Hooch). Only occasionally, however, did undistinguished children supply the main focus of a composition. This was the case in Frans Hals’s *Catharina Hooft with Her Nurse*, in Gabriel Metsu’s *The Sick Child*, Nicolaes Maes’s *Little Girl Rocking a Cradle*, Gerard ter Borch’s *Boy Defleaing His Dog*, Judith Leyster’s *Boy Playing a Flute*, Gerbrand van

der Eeckhout’s *Children of Altetus Tolling*, Rubens’s *Child with a Bird*, or Rembrandt’s son Titus reading—all of them from the seventeenth century.

Indeed, as this list suggests, early modern portraits and treatments of children in their own right are largely limited to the Netherlands, appearing with various props (birds, dogs, goats, sheep, lambs, fruit, flowers, toys, instruments), or as types (as shepherds, peasants, vendors), or in didactic contexts (as in de Hooch’s *Two Women Teaching a Child to Walk*, Hals’s *Boy Reading*, Jacob van Oost’s reading and painting lessons), sometimes bringing to life a moral lesson (as in Leyster’s *Boy and Girl with a Cat and an Eel*, c. 1635, Steen’s *Baptism*, which shows the bad drinking habits of adults rubbing off on the young, and Caspar Netscher’s *Lady Teaching a Child to Read, and a Child Playing with a Dog* from c. 1670). The following must therefore be counted among the most notable of what are relative exceptions: Caroto’s *Young Boy Holding a Child’s Drawing* (c. 1515); the anonymous *The Girl with the Dead Bird* from the same period; Bronzino’s portraits of a young man and woman with a prayer book from the mid-seventeenth century; *Four Portraits of the Young Sons of Sir John Ffolliott* (English School, c. 1610); Hals’s smiling *Three Children with a Goat Cart* and other nameless happy children (c. 1620); Cornelis de Vos’s own progeny (1621–22); De Hooch’s *Little Golf Players* (c. 1660); Gilbert Jackson’s *Daughter of Florence Poulett and Thomas Smyth of Ashton Court with Her Black Page* (c. 1640); Govert Flink’s *Girl by a High Chair* and Verspronck’s solemn *Girl in Blue* (1640–41); Ter Borch’s much stiffer *Portrait of Helena van der Schalcke* (c. 1648); Caesar van Everdingen’s *Two-Year-Old Boy with an Apple and a Finch* (1664); and, in the category of court freaks, Velázquez’s *Francisco Lezcano, “The Boy from Vallecas”* (c. 1640) and Miranda’s life-size portraits of the fat girl “La Monstrua,” naked and dressed (1680). In the eighteenth century the child as subject and motif becomes more frequent. Noteworthy here are Chardin’s *The Draughtsman, Soap Bubbles* and *The Card Castle* (from the 1730s) with a boy at play, and Watteau’s *The Dance (Iris)* (c. 1719), not to mention the 1742 *Graham Children* by Hogarth. After 1750, however, portraits of children start
appearing everywhere, contemporary with the invention of childhood. Painters, it seems, could no longer get enough of them. And the more they were painted, the cuter they got.

Since the political power claimed on behalf of infant princes is never scaled down, the surroundings in which they are depicted, if they include objects and furniture, must be instead. In all but such political portraits and the much later children’s room scenes (1750 on), interiors—if rendered at all—are scaled for grown-ups, not for the children commanding our attention. Aurélio de Figueiredo’s *Menina ao piano* (1892) shows an ordinary little girl standing at a piano, alone in a well-appointed playroom, where admittedly the closer of two armchairs are child-sized, yet the instrument and the more distant pieces are larger than would be ones consistently proportioned. The background, in other words, belongs to adults, who remain out of sight but who are thereby shown to be in command.

If in the *Menina* proportions are ultimately kept, and children’s furniture is distinguishable from that of adults, in a later canvas simply called *Interior with Boy Playing*, in which a little boy lies playing with wooden blocks on a small carpet, the room, its ceiling so high it cannot be seen, becomes expressive—it’s dimensions scaled to the inner world of a child. The world of adults looms large indeed, as it did for all of us (an impression that stepping into a forgotten interior we once inhabited as a child brings back in an instant). Virtually all the objects in the painting, among which no other toys can be seen, appear outsize, dwarfing the solitary boy. The deliberate nature of this characterization cannot be doubted. The boy’s absorption in the act of playing and imagining (suggested by the glimpse behind the drape-accented door-way of a leopard skin upon a railing in strong sun) is so great that even this most imposing reality falls away in the end. As such, the exaggerated disproportion between the room and the child will strike only those viewers without access to that other interior, existing only between the ears of a child, where the furniture, presumably, is always to scale.
§ Unrecognized

“It takes genius to know genius.”

§ The Takeaway Point

If we, whether young or old, ultimately hold in greater admiration men in their thirties for having been thoughtful enough to produce works worth reading for the rest of our lives, works of philosophy, systematic or not, that are “to live by,” “to think with,” passionate and full of unsettled questions, this is not just because they have drawn up a scheme for experience and figured out a plan for themselves and the rest of us while they still had time to implement it, but surely also and more because at their age we could not have come up with anything remotely comparable, or had enough patient interest even to undertake projects of such proportion.

As long as we persist in thinking them geniuses and freaks, rather than plain extraordinary, we cannot hope for the real takeaway point: that those we admire for doing great things are continually getting older, that we are constantly raising the age at which such admiration is warranted.

From this we will still need to draw our own conclusions. (These may have more to do with lowering the bar than with raising longevity…)

§ Reminder: Originals

It takes all kinds. Including ones-of-a-kind.
Confession of a Knife-Swaller

All my life I have risked my life for entertainment. But one can get used even to swallowing swords. The thrill I love is gone. I frequently wonder what will in fact kill me. Although it will probably be something predictable, some convergence of illness and injury, and I will go in relative peace, numbed by morphine and visions of the hereafter, I like to think of a cut—a little paper cut, no more—undoing me with unspeakable agony. Now that would be a surprise!

You Can Take the Clown out of the Circus, but You Can’t Take the Circus out of the Clown

Before we know it, we have grown out of our childhood delight at clowns, whose bulbous noses, floppy shoes and bulging bums vanish as soon as we convince ourselves that we have glimpsed the melancholy beneath the face-paint. We might be heard making such comments as: Imagine you had to dress up that way day after day, whether you felt like it or not…Whoever claims to keep their dignity and derive joy from such work is obviously deceiving themselves. Even “melancholy” is fancy dress for “sorrow and humiliation”; it trivializes the suffering that must have driven the poor man or woman to take up clowning. In this way our mature, uncanny reaction to clowns, never far behind the chuckle put on for our little charges, always betrays a fear of insignificance. We catch sight of it in the guileless double face of the clown, and pin it to his chest like a flower squirting something black, while it is our heart that had sprung the leak. If nothing else, this proves that in the most rustic and unrefined play-acting there is something for all temperaments and ages.
Cannibal on the Make

The great Eugène François Vidocq started out as a petty criminal and entertainer playing a South Sea cannibal in a circus. The job required him to eat raw meat, which for a Frenchman poses no problem at all. But Vidocq refused to devour the live rooster, a show-stopping act in any age. After his great “turnaround,” away from misconduct and his own death on an installment plan, he developed a forensic interest in dead bodies, which again helped him survive, this time as a criminalist.

After such a school, who wouldn’t become a real cannibal for a season, given the chance—if only to prove (by not surviving) that one wasn’t cut out for it, or, on the contrary, that it was no big deal? For as long as we eventually suffer our victims’ fate, do we not settle our accounts?

Soylent Green

Certain taboos are tokens only of luxury. Maybe, nomen omen, Bacon (the painter) was disposed to reflect on this: “If I go into a butcher shop I always think it’s surprising that I wasn’t there instead of the animal.” As we continue to search for the ultimate form of renewability, we will see that Bacon “had a point” and tighten our dietary restrictions.

* Quoted in David Sylvester, Interviews with Francis Bacon (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), 46.
Cities of God

*Paris, où il faut vivre en se crevant*

(Paris, where you can only live by working yourself to death)
—Vincent van Gogh to his brother, 1888

The modern worldly cosmopolis as the city of God? Is it not heavenly and holy enough? Would not many mortals sacrifice their health, pleasure, solitude, and peace of mind to live in it? Here the lonely will find their companion, the moribund will be healed, the wretched attended to, the bored given purpose, the active, consequence, and the corrupt, close watch. And the watchers in turn will be watched night and day.

Sand-Glass

Soft-core fiction, however silly or perverted, has many defenders, they in turn are belittled by fans of hardcore pornography, these in turn buried by viewers of torture-porn and snuff, and so on all the way down. At the very bottom sits a man reading a newspaper, his window on the real world. It is to him that all of this can ultimately be traced; with him the “pyramid” of sexual tastes is turned over again like an hour-glass—next time around, his newspaper folded, he will come out on top.

As long as the sand keeps flowing, it will always be so: the informed citizen’s mind now filthy, now in impeccable control.

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The Man in the Street

The disenchantment of “the average man” has its reverse and probable cause in the earlier wonder for what the French call *l’homme de la rue*: the “common” man with a secret, private, or previous life, one you would never suspect. This man was brought to light by numerous nineteenth- and twentieth-century novelists, most successfully Eugène Sue, Victor Hugo, Adalbert Stifter, and Ralph Ellison. He was there in the paintings of Paul Delvaux, and can still be seen from time to time in movie houses. But the narrowing band of character and activity we today find remarkable is telltale of our stunted fascination and dwindling curiosity. The remarkable life, which would justify our interest, is already public, illuminated, its success measured in fame. It need not be discovered by writers and filmmakers; like a plant, it will find the limelight itself, freeing us from the work of investigation for which we anyway have no time. Eccentricity, formerly registered as marked difference of behaviour, has become both rarer and more common: rarer because of its professional marginalization, urban conformity and rural invisibility, yet more common because so much of what is outside the average, the social norm, belongs in one broad category, where the banal, the undesirable and the intolerable are lumped together. Searching for Sugar Man and finding Rodriguez, stumbling on a private archive and finding Vivian Maier are only recent examples of a longer trend in which a small number of amateurs are motivated to sift through this human refuse in search of something precious. They are of course portrayed as great exceptions, gone unnoticed owing more to respect for privacy — the decency of looking away has replaced binocular snooping — than to wall-to-wall apathy — the assumption that your neighbours are hardly less insipid than yourself (otherwise you would have heard of them).

Perhaps it is now only creative minds that are driven to seek out the unusual as material for reinvention, and capable of presenting it in the form of a spectacle for passive consumption. Could it really be that the public was
once more accepting of the diversity in its midst, when large cities absorbed large numbers of exotic, provincial, or shady extraction without institutions to regulate and assimilate them? Perhaps what to us are everyday encounters with strangers had come with the thrill of adventure (a dépaysement avant la lettre) that we now look for in surrogates—books and films, or online chatrooms. Perhaps the stranger still held in his mind knowledge of the world that could not otherwise be obtained. And if not knowledge, then entertainment, as when individuals on the surface quite unappealing, unrelatable, antipathique, had a story to tell, fascinating and unheard-of experiences. One imagines that the different walks of life of those brought together by modernity were a source of amusement and release from tedium—that the man-in-the-street was, in a word, a mystery worth probing.

Though the dwellers of today’s metropolis still come from elsewhere, we are considerably less interested. As earlier with the individual’s romanticization—an aesthetic injection of mystery into misery, poverty and crime—the cause must be sought in mass media, which have long worked round the clock to finally satisfy our curiosity about one another, in the end killing the “common man” as enigma. The threshold between the public and the private is frequently nothing more than disgust: “Too much information!” In principle, however, comfort with other lives has gone up dramatically with the freedom of anonymous online socializing. Everything is fair game for sharing and discussion among virtual strangers. In effect, we have unprecedented access and insight into those around us, who turn out to be too much like us, and whose lives therefore are taken to be every bit as uneventful, predictable, not to say bland—something we would sooner avoid than take a keen interest in. The deep roots of being down on others are in dissatisfaction with ourselves when our lack of originality is revealed. A sense of homogeneity, the price for fitting in well enough to pass scrutiny, is especially vivid in global cities, where the pursuit of distinction is most intense. These cities continue to lure us with the promise of a more exciting, more stylish life.
Whatever originality and aura of mystery accompanying the newcomer to even the lowest social stratum that cannot be monetized are soon stripped away by the ruthlessness of urban living. The seemingly endless options for urban self-fulfillment come down to just two: buying into a (city or neighbourhood) brand, or picking up a lifestyle package (at a discount) during a construction boom. Can the dream of individualism be taken for real when, at every turn, we confront our own life in multiple copies, down to the smallest detail? Can the mysteries of *l'homme de la rue* ever rival our common regret, resentment, and smothering sense of mediocrity?

§ **Thoroughly Unthorough**

We aren’t any more careless about details. The devil may be in them now, but before it was God: they were His hiding place, so we assumed they were well taken care of.

§ **Rise to the Occasion**

Sometimes *stooping* is what’s required for an occasion. After all, things *fall* together to create one; an *occasion*, word-historically, is a “falling together” of circumstances.

The set phrase, “rise to the occasion,” is one of those invisible contradictions devised by those who like to take credit for merely rising.

Exposed, they protest: Ah, but we are rising into place.
Comedown

We assume that the road of Ought, of duty and obligation, righteous and supercilious, is upward, while that of Is, of reality, base and ignoble, points down. That is uncontroversial. We therefore further assume that once we have scrambled to a higher position, everyone should look up to us and strive to follow us there, even if they will likely fail and sometimes even tumble below where they began. And those “beneath” us in this way (unless they are irredeemable scoundrels) generally concur.

It may be very difficult to rise, but to descend — to step down confidently without falling — is immeasurably harder on the character. From the top, gained with difficulty, a great and swift plunge would, however unlikely, be easy. One could afford to drop a bit if necessary, but given the slipperiness of the slopes, falling by degrees would not be feasible. The only safe path downward is on foot, little by little. What makes this especially gruelling are the reminders of “No Return” along it. It is presumption alone that dictates that lowering oneself, even just to the general level, is easy if one leaves character out of it. It is not. It may be good for the soul to look at life from a lower altitude, but after one has been high up, the view is quite unbearable.
§ Iron-y

“Most of our iron is turned into fetters,” and blacksmiths are “weighed down with the making of chains,” Juvenal remarks in his Satires. If we are to believe the archaeological record, since at least the Bronze Age a good deal of our strength and effort have been dedicated to shackling weakness, with the unintended consequence of toughening it up.

§ Choosing Gentleness

_It is with lashes of the whip that one leads the cattle to pasture._

—Heraclitus†

A When there is no pasture, conscience asks us to hide the whip.

A’ It is with humane restraint that livestock is led to slaughter.

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§ The Sacred Heart of Convicts

If, rather than justice, the rationale of imprisonment remained to inspire inmates to repentance, penitentiaries would replace churches.
§ Misericords

misericord:

*apartment or room in a monastery set apart for those monks permitted relaxation of the monastic rule*
  *a. relaxation of certain monastic rules for infirm or aged monks or nuns*
  *b. monastery where such relaxations can be enjoyed*

*also, subsellium: small projection/ledge on the underside of a hinged seat in a choir stall, which, when the seat is lifted, gives support to the standing occupant. Also used attrib. to designate or denote the elaborate, often bawdy, carvings of scenes from secular or religious life with which medieval misericords were frequently decorated.*

*medieval dagger, used for the coup de grâce to a wounded foe (OED, RHWUD)*

A relaxation of rules is permitted to the rule-abiding at their discretion, as long they remain discreet about it, since to the uninitiated it looks no different than cheating.

Choir stalls, where bums in seats meant bawdy thoughts, were one of several discreetly designated places within a medieval church poised to turn it inside out.

Life wounds us mortally. Let’s not discard too quickly the euthanasia of the mercy stroke.

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