§ Better than Nothing

We polish a rotten apple, burnish it to a perfect shine, and it’s only as we bite into it, still salivating, that we realize this was only to fool ourselves when we had nothing better to eat.

§ Greek Gift

Some people pose as life-coaches who want to teach us to live to the fullest, in harmony with nature, at peace with ourselves; their intentions only clear up as we are giving up the ghost.
§ **Devotio moderna**

*Borne down by the weight of wings.*

—Róbert Gál

Even without God, the solitary—the “monkish”—existence inadvertently assumes a ritualistic—a “pious”—character. The simpler the life, the more pronounced its religious features. We carry the world’s expectations of us into our hermitage, priding ourselves on our private orderliness. As long as the mind does not deviate, we feel our days have been well-spent, and we have fulfilled our duty to the world: rising, the first meal, light or heavy, the first stimulant of the day. Morning ablutions, drying and dressing of the body. Choice of activity, planning out the rest of the day, exercise, a look at the budget, concluded with entertainment of some sort. We know it all well enough, take pleasure in this simple discipline, and yet when other things come to occupy our mind, these private rituals quickly lose their gravity and precision. It is still possible to be devout, as long as mind and body worship each other without interruption or intermediary.

§ **Overripe**

Doubt—worm in the fruit off the Tree of Knowledge.

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§ Hortus conclusus

hortus conclusus: enclosed, inviolate garden, in reference to The Song of Songs; in spiritual and exegetical tradition, symbol of the soul, the Church, or the virginity of Mary (OED)

I lack that piety towards myself that certain poets of the word (or of the heart only) have in spades (or cultivate religiously). In their veneration of their sealed-up fountains, of what they hold in, they are as monks whose pens have dried up. What gets creative juices flowing is also what keeps the nib wet. But their self-piety guards, with parcity, against blots and spills.

The Muse, meanwhile, has given up on them. (Are you surprised she prefers action to love?) She hoped for prodigals who wonder, like Lewis’s Ambrosio, “Should I not barter for a single embrace the reward of my sufferings for thirty years?” and who answer at once, with one unwavering nod.

§ Bad Apples

Some poor souls cherish illusion so much they will overlook nature’s decay. It may be decay is all too familiar—a condition in many ways not unlike their own. Some, less poor, are known to cherish rottenness instead, perhaps for its chastening effects, or, not infrequently, from a doleful, morbid disposition. But it is a rare bird who, like Schiller (author of apple-archer William Tell), discovers its salubrious influence, and can barely work without a rotting apple stuffed here and there.

§ Call of the Wild

Every now and then, surprise at the drawn-out howl issuing from one’s body. How is it that something so purely physiological and localizable—not to say reduced to digestion, putrefaction, and the ceaseless fluid flow through veins and organs in varying states of decay—can associate itself in one’s mind with the wilderness outside: a clap of thunder, moonlit crags, a snowy forest, setting for this lupine cry...? The call of the wild rises from deep within our bowels, somewhere along their dark corridors, whose fascination for us suddenly rivals that of owl burrows or fox tunnels.

§ Speak for Yourself!

No “individual death” is individual.

§ Falls the Shadow

Going through life aware of omnipresent death is like lying on a beach with one’s eyes closed, and knowing one is still there only by the chill of a shadow and the sand in one’s mouth.
Campanology

campanology: the art or study of bell-ringing or -making

in the nocturnal small hours we are nearest
—Cyril Connolly, The Unquiet Grave

The hourly nocturnal tolling of a solitary bell outside a hotel window will, unless you somehow manage to sleep through it, stir up vivid associations. For the freedom from visual sensation gives priority to hearing and feeling, and expands the mnemonic field, allowing the unfamiliar sound to bathe us in past occasions in which it was heard. The ringing bell rings a bell of bell-ringing. The most immediate and frequent memories, to which the darkness and position of the sleeper no doubt contribute, are of funerals. If the hotel is in the country, and the window open so that the summer air fills the room, and the bed happens to be no wider than a casket, and the sheets sufficiently lustrous or cold—and one is tired to boot, making the necessary rest much sweeter—then the association of blissful repose with eternal sleep cannot really be avoided. And as we slide down thoughts like these, past the threshold of consciousness, deeper and deeper without quite making it to sleep, kept awake just a little by each knell, yet less and less with each as we begin ourselves to resonate, we have as well the vague sensation of fading in stages, of peaceful sliding into nothingness. Kant’s “negative pleasure” captures well the bittersweet elation of this self-vigil. But perhaps there are many more who would find the ominous sound, combined with their recumbency, excruciating, and are already kept awake by fears of dying—lying long, too long, not altogether long for this world. Their fear makes of them early risers. To enjoy this time and concert, the church bell’s

* Cyril Connolly, The Unquiet Grave: A Word Cycle by Palinurus (1941; n.p.: New York: Persea, 1981), 71. The full sentence reads: “We are farthest from the idea of death as in the nocturnal small hours we are nearest.”
indifferent marking of the interval, the key of death needs first to be silenced.

But as the vain worry is put to rest, one side refuses to die. The thrill of this repose, the thrill of remaining in the darkness, turns the squeaking coffin back into a bed. The night becomes sleepless in a different light—as, pulled back from the edge of nothing, we are delivered into the arms of fantasy.

§

Death Being Our Final Act

Death is an act that must make up for the passivity of our birth.
§ Somewhere

“De mortuis nihil nisi bonum, Do not speak ill of the dead”

“Death becomes her” (1---)

“Leaving me so soon?!” (16--)

“If I were to live again, I would live just as I lived” (15--)

“My work here is done” (17--)

“It’s autumn, one almost believes in death” (1890)

“And just last month he was among the living…” (18--)

“I’m not as lively as I used to be” (2008)

“I’m not dead yet!” (2010)

“Dead serious, always — my epitaph” (2012)

Thus we prepare for going out as we could not for coming in.
§ “Universal Solvent”

The secret attraction of alchemical laboratories may well be that they combust, killing the alchemist.

§ Surprised by Death

There is a motif in European Baroque painting: the moment of death taking those visited by fortune by surprise. Its stock victims are the miser, the maiden, the lovers, the voluptuary. The pictures are for the most part didactic, expanding the vanitas genre to human figures. Unlike the medieval *ars moriendi*, illustrated literature on how to die a blessed death (a very different beast from today’s death with dignity), they specialize in depicting unpreparedness for it.

This peculiar graphic convention declined as the individual ascended the ladder of human value; death’s image as black-draped skeleton ultimately followed in its footsteps. Modern treatments humanized death, revising the crude symbolism of its personification (*La Mort et les jeunes filles* of 1872 by Puvis de Chavannes’s shows a glimpse of a white-bearded reaper, and Edvard Munch erotizizes death in a 1894 lithograph, followed by Egon Schiele). Jean-François Millet’s *Death and the Woodcutter* (1859) stands at the tail-end of an allegorical tradition that regarded death as the leveler of inequalities, and already speaks to the modern age, in which inequality cannot be masked any longer. Rather than beauty, love, or luxury, death in this picture puts an end to work. Clad in white this time, it takes the labourer away from his labours. It cuts short an activity that secures, perhaps barely, his humble livelihood. Rather than reminding us of our mortality, pointing out that death may come when we least expect it, or (in the case of misers) moralizing earthly excess, or posing simple-minded questions— *Which is better, labour or death?* — Millet’s nineteenth-century vanitas suggests that dying is a part of nature, and no bringer of justice.
§ **Sainte Supplice**

“[T]ruth has a virtue,” wrote Hervé Guibert, recording the truth about his own dying of AIDS. It is to truth that his final days were consecrated. Truthfulness, truth-speaking, truth-telling, defies weakness in its defiance of mendacity, to others and to oneself. Truth is strength, courage, and it is justice. Once the shameful truth, the truth of wrong-thinking or wrong-doing, is uttered, it cannot be shamed back into silence. It speaks and punishes those who deny it, and makes the truth-teller virtuous (by virtue of the truth . . .). Nothing we can do or say will make the scandal of truth go away as long as it serves anyone as a weapon of offence and self-defence. So often, it is for and by truth that life is tortured, and to truth that it is sacrificed. *He died for the truth . . . Truth was his martyrdom . . .* And truth to yourself will be *yours.*

§ **“The moral earth, too, is round!”**†

Launch any wickedness far enough and it will drift towards solid moral ground or, cast upon the stormy seas of self-sacrifice, succeed in saving its soul. Sail for the lands of the good and the fierce winds will drive you to the shallows of bitterness. Each journey, it’s said, expands our moral horizons, but there is no telling where we will end up in search of our route to spiritual India.

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†  Nietzsche, *Gay Science,* p. 163, sec. 289 (“Get on the Ships!”).
A Whole in a Mole

in response to:

[Cosmopolitanism should] refer to the ethical imperative of recognizing and promoting the equal moral worth of each and every human being, while at the same time being sensitive to the strong possibility that our efforts to do so will founder on, even reinforce, the world’s inequalities. The solution to this paradox, which plagues even the best cosmopolitanisms, lies in the fact that it is nevertheless possible to discover particular cases where this ethical imperative is denied and to combat the false universals on which its denial is based.

—James D. Ingram, Radical Cosmopolitics

Combatting the false universals, on this model, resembles a game of Whac-A-Mole, a type of arcade game based on redemption. “Redemption games,” we read in Wikipedia, “are typically arcade games of skill that reward the player proportionally to their score in the game. The reward most often comes in the form of tickets, with more tickets being awarded for higher scores. These tickets can then be redeemed (hence the name) at a central location for prizes. The most inexpensive prizes (candy, small plastic or rubber toys) may only require a small number of tickets to acquire, while the most expensive ones (skateboards, low-end electronics) may require several thousand. In general, the amount of money spent to win enough tickets for a given prize will exceed the value of the prize itself.”

In other words, we redeem our skill and money—which would otherwise remain unused and be spent on needed things—in the forms of prizes. The game enacts the conversion. Perhaps the only redemption we can find is of this kind.

§ *In saecula saeculorum*

Assuming that the universality of moral reason does not exist buried somewhere where we cannot see it, we must resign ourselves to never knowing if we could have achieved universality by cultural convergence rather than conquest.
§ Sola

[The papists are making a tremendous fuss because the word sola (alone) is not in Paul’s text, and this addition of mine to the words of God is not to be tolerated.

—Martin Luther®

Translating the Word of God had caused Luther no small frustration. This was not only because the propria verba did not come to him (they did, as to his collaborators). Calling St. Paul to his defence was not much help where a word (however implicit) had been added to the Pauline text.

Yet we should not infer from this special case, with the future of a church at stake in the choice and arrangement of words, that translation is a thankless task. There was a time—the time of Luther—when only seminal texts were subject to translation. That kept the stakes rather high, though nowhere as high as around Scripture. And it was recognized that the addition of a single word, alone, which, as explained in Luther’s open letter, was stylistically necessary to be intelligible to his intended audience of (Latin) illiterates and speakers of German, would have far-reaching implications for religious observance—that indeed a new faith hung on this sole word, its ground and fulfillment.

§ Skill Rewarded

There’s a scene in The East . . . in which the young corporate spy played by Brit Marling sits among half a dozen hippies at a rustic dinner table, each of them stiff-backed in a straight-jacket. Bowls of what appears to be chunky tomato soup rest in front of the diners, who are members of an anarchist collective. A big brown spoon protrudes from each bowl. Marling’s Sarah Moss, the newcomer, has been instructed to dig in first, but after clenching the spoon between her teeth and clumsily trying to convey the liquid to her mouth, she gives up in frustration, eventually succumbing to slurping, Fido-style. Her tablemates, a motley crew of twenty-somethings in facial hair and flannel, bend toward their own bowls and begin to silently clench their mouths around their spoons, skillfully filling them with soup and lifting them to the mouths of the individuals seated next to them.

In a certain old tale it is given that dining in hell leads not to satiety but to greater hunger, as the sinful diners, given only unwieldy long spoons, know not how to help themselves or one another. But the difference between selfishness and selflessness has evidently blurred in modern times; even the eternally damned could eventually figure out that, with such poor utensils, the best way to help themselves is by helping others.

In such circumstances, a new physical constraint had to be introduced to tell the infernal and the celestial realms apart. Why else replace the long spoon with a regular one and a straitjacket, as implements in a morality test? The fool’s garment binding each diner adds a physical challenge and holds greater potential for humiliation. To pass for good in this version of heaven/hell, one must figure out not just the benefit of helping one’s neighbour, but also, more crucially, how to use one’s mouth to spoon-feed.

§ Blunt Euphemism

Eat as well as you can before you must “give up your spoon”—old German idiom.

§ At the Limit: A Medley

τῶι οὖν τόζωι ὄνομα βίος, ἔργον δὲ θάνατος.

(The living, when the dead wood of the bow springs back to life, must die.)

(The name of the bow [βιός] is life [βίος]; its work is death.)

—Heraclitus

Bios meant both “life” and “bow,” with the very small difference that in life the accent fell on the first syllable, in bow, on the second.

“There he stood like an Apollo, with imperishable youth of soul, although old in body,” remarked the young Eckermann in 1825 on seeing Goethe poised with bow and arrow.† With the release of the string, activity passes to the arrow.

In 2012, at the London Olympics, a legally blind archer set a new individual world record. His sense of the target could only be very approximate (a blob of yellow 70 metres away), but his aim was something else. No matter how blind, bios reaches its target exactly.

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† Goethe, Conversations with Eckermann, 112.
Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits.

—Wittgenstein*

For each, the limit is in how far one sees. The ends of life—there is more than one!—lie at the limit of inner sight and imagination, which follow the arrow on its trajectory. If it is shot in the dark, its limit is everywhere. Once it is released, and flies off course, it cannot be set straight. The end of any life is barely seen coming. Whether the target is or isn’t met, it is met unseen.

It is with the art of dying as with marksmanship, the art of indirection: to hit a target, one must aim slightly above it. All arts are a form of target practice, and genius in any of them is a direct hit. “The greatest fault of a penetrating mind is not to hit the mark but to go beyond it,” wrote the great moralist La Rochefoucauld.†

Losing sight of the bull’s-eye can mean one of two things: the first is artlessness, the second, death.

‡ A Fate Worse than Fate

Fate has long been the stuff and substance of tragedy, signifying doom and death. But is its opposite, fatelessness, any less appalling?

§ In the Oratory

Made my bed in a Gothic oratory, believing this to be decisive in escaping fate or at least my many bad habits. But before I knew what hit me I was attacked by said habits allegorically on every side. Door to window, floor to ceiling moved the symbol of my zodiac sign, vaguely menacing and cruciform. Black, in one case lame, attracted by sheets—the creeps it gave me made me nearly jump out of my skin. And thus the poor creature rendered me the very service I had hoped for, but did not receive, from the sanctuary: the sting of self-reckoning.

§ Taken for a Ride

At moments when you have turned your life into your beast to be broken in and ridden out on you can think yourself master of your fate.

§ Laudator temporis acti

The praisers of times past, the ones discontent with the present, preferring instead things as they used to be, as they know them to have been, as they recognized them to be only in their passing. No, not “the good old days,” but the awful days when they were boys, vulnerable and terrified. When their lives had meaning, sharpened by danger, blows, and given the chase. To lose touch with such things, they say, is to lose appreciation for calm. They should know.
§ Wish Experience

[A] wish fulfilled is the crowning of experience. In folk symbolism, distance in space can take the place of distance in time; that is why the shooting star, which plunges into infinite space, has become the symbol of a fulfilled wish. The ivory ball that rolls into the next compartment, the next card that lies on top are the very antithesis of a falling star.

—Benjamin*

They told me about a rare experience that befell them, when lightning bolted into their house, flew across the room and, ricocheting off surfaces and splitting the stove, killed no one. At that time, wartime, it was likelier to have been a bullet; yet somehow up to that point they had been eerily spared all harassment, becoming careless with their luck. To be struck by lightning — It was a wish they did not know they had.

Sometimes a lightning bolt is needed to instill caution and fear for one’s life among the lucky ones, when the greater danger meanwhile is from others.

§ Courage and Its Crop

A War is not all death. It does not make all level.

A’ Its principle is inequality. Death is the perfect counterweight.

§ Save the Date

Some truths persist, others are of the moment and die with it. Those are the truths of fear, audacity, exuberance, fury, or ecstasy.

§ Pied Pipers

Need only to play very quietly.

§ Hitler Today

*Books don’t have to educate or turn people into better human beings—they can also just ask questions. If mine makes some readers realise that dictators aren’t necessarily instantly recognisable as such, then I consider it a success.*

—Timur Vermes, author of *Look Who’s Back* (*Er ist wieder da*) (Germany, 2012)*

A Another picture of Hitler—as our contemporary—where one would least expect it—where he would be unrecognizable even to himself!

B But he would still be a vegetarian. Isn’t it time he gave *carnivores* a bad name instead?

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§ The True Believer

_in response to section two of Kafka’s Zürau Aphorism §99:

“There are some who assume that next to the great original deception, another, smaller deception was practiced specifically for them. It’s as if, when a romantic comedy is performed on stage, the actress, in addition to the lying smile for her beloved, keeps a further, particularly cunning smile for a certain spectator in Row Z. That is going too far.”

The paranoiac only sees truth in uncovered lies. That is what makes him the most zealous of believers.

§ Uncannied

Seeing one’s old outfit on the back of another family’s child, one is confronted with the strange, autonomous life of articles of clothing. Seeing one’s jacket and slacks on the back of a scarecrow brings to mind the brevity of one’s own. Perhaps this explains our gratitude to the wind for setting our tattered cuffs and sleeves adance. For what difference is there between our life and all this flailing and flapping?

§ Departures

We find magic and beauty in the idea that only farewells reveal to us the full intensity of mutual feeling. And that the parting glance thrown in haste or under duress is therefore most penetrating of all, searing forever in our memory not just a moment’s appearance but the true face of those whom we are seeing perhaps for the last time.

We find the idea beautiful because we know reality to be different: those who depart from our life or mind, whether by choice or nature’s whim, do not linger. The “dear departed”—we have no time to think of them, any more than we did when they were with us, are maybe even glad to be free of them, eager to forget them, along with mutual feelings and the truth revealed in our parting. And the sooner our life fills the emptiness their leaving created, the sooner we ourselves move on, the more it dawns on us that our own self is among those we have left behind, without realizing it at the time. It is the sense of these intimate leavings that gives the farewell its wistful sentimental charm.
Dead Heroes

One should not draw lines where death has already drawn the thickest one. It is not only our business but our duty to find out all that remains. How one sorts through and what one does with it is another matter: a matter of the kind of story (fact, legend, or myth) one wants to print. If newly discovered personal details have bearing on the “life” of our dead heroes — those especially of whom little is known except their heroic deeds and death — we ought to try to find as many such details as there is memory to yield. Sorting out the facts from rumours and fictions tests our deepest emotional and moral attachments. And who among historians would do away with imagination in their work (assuming it could be done)? Bare details alone would not get us far. Having heard survivors tell the stories of their lives, we must imagine what stories the dead would tell as nonsurvivors.

Heroes and Saints

We call heroes those who acted as we ourselves hope to act. Our saints, however, are both masters and martyrs of what we fear would corrupt us. Albert Einstein said admiringly of Marie Curie, who neither wooed fame nor threw a fit when it passed her by, that of “all celebrated beings, [she was] the one whom fame has not corrupted” — clearly implying he could not say the same of himself.

§ Church Grotesque

On his travels through Russia, Custine mentions that the remains of Charles Eugène de Croÿ lay unburied for more than a century and subsequently, mummified, were exhibited in a church in Tallinn in a glass coffin (the price of admission being used to settle the dead duke’s debts). Embalmed bodies of citizens and clerics are still to be seen in churches and monasteries, and the Vatican has been known to make mummies of its saints. It is hard to know anymore how much of this Church pomp and circumstance is earnestly meant, how much is humour at the expense of the faithful, and how much plain folly. How seriously are we to take the name of the Pontiff’s Wi-Fi network, Santo Spirito? And how much credence should we give a call of one apostolate to limit communication with “the cloud” when its avowed goal is contemplating the godhead through the Cloud of Unknowing?
§ Praying That They Last

The structural catholicity, ubiquity, and integrity of ecclesiastical buildings east and west, ever a provocation to the spiritually lapsed or unmusical, over the centuries made them a home for many enterprises, as dubious as they were diverse. Spacious, sometimes isolated and fortified, they proved ideal for warehouses, recreation centres, infirmaries, and prisons. The more remote, the closer to God, the farther from other men. The walls of Mont Saint-Michel remember the rattling of chains. In the 1920s and 30s, Solovki Island Monastery stood watch over the abyss of the gulag system. The Soviets were particularly good at these repurposings: some of their most splendid churches became museums of atheism, displaying among other things gruesome instruments of torture.

The aesthetic appeal of church architecture, combined with the decline of religion in the West, led also to more agreeable conversions. Parts of the Jumièges Abbey, deemed by Hugo France’s prettiest ruin, were dismantled after the revolution. History avenged itself on its spiritual enemy, and was in turn revised by historical sentiment. Such deconsecrated uses continue, but have veered towards the banal in areas of the world that have no real quarrels with faith. When not left in a comely state of decay, many of the Christian edifices of today’s secularizing societies have been turned over to tourism as boutique hotels and museums of themselves, not to mention private residences.

Emptied of God, their sanctuary lamps stone-cold, they have kept only their beauty, their solidity, and their continuity with a past sanctified by virtue of its definitive passing. In a time of generalized manufactured obsolescence, it is the longevity of human creations—the cathedrals, the pyramids, and the great walls—that amazes above all. Only let’s not forget that it is not merely their scale and age that saved them from all manner of destruction; we have worked to prop and build them up, and our purposes were many. And the longer they stood, the more they were worth saving.
§ Changing of the Guard

It is a strange, reversible spectacle that stages Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* inside an Anglican chapel on a Saturday afternoon without changing the props—leaving things much as they looked on Friday and would look the next day at mass. Yet one notices the dissonance less than if the reverse were to take place, and a theatre set up for mass, a congregation to file in ticketless. This openness and convertibility of churches, chapels and the like is not surprising when we remember that Christian houses, though their institution is only two millennia old, came to serve purposes other than the worship of God—a staggering variety that the oldest surviving amphitheatres cannot rival. Only those great arenas that, as in Arles, have once sheltered an entire Christian village surpass the churches and cathedrals in sheer catholicity.
§ Repetition

No one can deny that history can be profoundly affected by our conception of it. Understanding history as series of multifariously articulated recurrences, from the most general to the most minute—put simply, seeing all events as repetitions of past events—has consequences for the course of history itself. Further refinements to such a concept of history have further ramifications for its course. It matters greatly whether we understand repetition as a natural, quasi-cosmic occurrence, or else as a human proclivity for modelling—thinking even of historical and moral progress in terms of making and filling moulds. We can easily guess some of the consequences of these two, rather disparate attitudes if they were allowed to play a decisive role. To take first the second view, we could either resist the malleability of history and human affairs by breaking the moulds and hoping for the best, or just the opposite: we could embrace and enhance history’s repetitiveness by recognizing certain models and improving on past events, by perfecting kinds of event and moulding the real in the image of the ideal. Taking the first view, however (which must be distinguished from simple resignation in intervening in the course of history), we could, again, either resist the foreclosure of certain novel possibilities implied by history’s neutral, or at any rate non-human, process, or, to the contrary, accept that the emergence of any discernibly new patterns would not, in this case, be beneficial, and actively prevent human effort to open them up. If, by and large, one can always see some combination of these effects, it is because the two attitudes just sketched are distributed remarkably evenly among those who think and act historically. The “balance” of any event widely cast as a repetition—for example George W. Bush’s war in Iraq—would then be recorded based on whether or not, in each particular case, the benefits of perfecting an occurrence outweigh those of moving past it as far as is humanly possible.
§ Excuses, Excuses

The variety of historical forms is still inexhaustible; there is no excuse for repetition.

§ History of Survival

Human history is fundamentally the *history of survival*. Its function is to tell us not what we are living or can expect to live, but what we could not and should not want to live, because we have outlived it. The past is what had to be overcome for the sake of survival. Everything else is present.

§ What the Future Withholds

It is wrong, and potentially dangerous, to think of the past as a map and guide to the present or future. History is not a reliable compass or predictive tool. Quite aside from the fact that it is chock-full of what we should probably avoid (the good sense behind Santayana’s *bon mot*), in approximating what was, history indicates the negative of what is and will be, what cannot possibly await us: it is as in the joke that if the improbable happens it cannot happen again, at least not anytime soon. The chances of it “recurring” in a given period of time seem radically to diminish (otherwise its probability would need to be revised). All of history appears improbable in this joke, which on a sufficiently high level of particularity or resolution of complex historical events, depending on the combination and synergy of multiple factors, becomes a serious proposition. How else could historical change be observed? Simply repeating Santayana’s counterintuitive
lesson, that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,”* will not make it stick. We are in greater danger from ignoring the inventiveness of the present and future than from repeating the bad past.

The past’s becoming historical ensures it will not be re-lived *grosso modo*; to repeat it exactly, we would have to as exactly know it first. What we know of the past we have surpassed. To be sure, the past—as knowledge of historical occurrences and forms, and as material remnants—continues to influence the actual and possible; it provides some of the colours for the new day, but does not execute the defining strokes, and it is most detectable as underpainting. For these profound and superficial reasons, which however are not definitive, we continue to reach for history’s pedagogical crutch. Just as many of the forms of the past were never seen before and may never be seen again, so the shapes of our moment and all the moments to come will forever elude us, and we would do better to approach them on our own strength.

§ Event List

Striking from our list of possible futures every known past leaves us with an empty page. A full page is comforting until we see that it consists mainly of what cannot be again. If we ignore the issue and retain these check-off items as only the vaguest of outlines, as historical forms, we hold on to containers that won’t hold the flow of time; the future will overfill or else leak out of them, and its apparent shapelessness will defeat us.

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§ Digging Up the Past

The fact that the past can be “exhumed” and “x-rayed” with ever more powerful tools of analysis of what materially remains of it makes it unlikely to be put to rest anytime soon. Our age has rummaged through the past more than any before it.

But perhaps we should distinguish between at least two pasts: the one that weighs, for which graves are dug every day, which is mourned as it is let go—the past of customs and languages, species and ecosystems—and the distant or buried past, innocuous, ensconced in its pastness, alluring in its strangeness.

Only the latter is of interest to the raiders of history. It is the past of treasure hunters.

§ Historian as Folk-Hero

One could say, with Benjamin, that “History decays into images, not into stories.” Confronting and awakening these mute images is, for him, both necessary and fraught with danger. The historian’s ordeal corresponds in one crucial respect to the trial of the hero in certain myths and folktales: the perils of looking back at the past call to mind the fateful corollary of the irresistible backwards glance. This glance—which the German word Rückblick captures so well—can send the hero to his doom, to which the voice of temptation continually lures him. One hapless moment of fear, weakness, inattention, or curiosity, and he is turned to stone, joining the ranks of those who tried to keep to the path before him—reminders of the petrifaction awaiting

him should he also look back, mute companions along his progress up Graveyard-Mountain (as it is called in one story) as he steadfastly “makes history.” If he stays the course, however, as soon as he reaches the top he becomes not just immune but puissant—able to break the spell over his unfortunate predecessors, whom his perseverance has set free.

Similarly, those who inherit a burdensome history, who undertake to tell it, must refuse to face it until they can redeem it. Their anxiety finds a correlate in that affecting the hero who might stray at any point from the path to deliverance from, and for, his great burden; in the same way must they advance without looking behind them, their ears stopped up against the forces seeking to waylay them, so as to emerge at History’s summit into a kind of salvific present. There, finally, the past is made good and their willful blindness to its terrors justified.

Could this parallel shed light on the conviction of a young German historian of one such difficult chapter who insisted that, when it comes to the Holocaust, “The Germans should just shut up”? He has recognized that aspects of this history, in order to be countenanced, must first, as it were, be saved. Determined to survive the ordeal of disenchanting the past for the future by resisting a glimpse of its horrors, all the while seeking a glimpse of the horror that seeks to hold him back, he holds out the hope to one day look upon them with a clear conscience and the supreme satisfaction of having done history a great service.
§ Lower Down & Around the Corner

The regress of nostalgic sentiment observed by Raymond Williams in generations of historians and christened “the escalator of history”* doubtless has its counterpart in the progressive vision of imminent utopia foretold by generations of futurologists both right and left. At every point, we are a magical “20–30 years” away—a mere corner we might just live to see turned. Neither pattern of thinking and feeling is per se an error; it is only regrettable that those descending down the moving staircase never look around the bend, and that those who stand there like watchmen never recognize themselves in them.

§ Blast from the Past

There is no time or place—even the most hellish in association and no matter how marked by boredom or destruction—that could not have its nostalgist. The reason for this is simple. Memory, like longing, is selective and not subject to consensus.

Nostalgia, like love, is a complex emotion. It requires not just, like love, an emotional attachment, an affinity finding expression in images, ideas, and judgments, but also its temporal extension, its “going way back.” We can be love-struck but are unlikely to be stricken with nostalgia, even if nostalgia can rival love in emotional intensity. To reach this intensity, however, nostalgia needs to have a history, while it is precisely such prior attachment that is incompatible with a coup de foudre and typically precludes it.

In the language of love, this duration of affection would be called constancy or fidelity. Yet, for the sake of constancy, fidelity does not extend to the representation of the object of that affection. In fact, the emotional attachment in nostalgia as in love draws its strength from that representation’s relative independence of its object, from its not being “true to reality,” which fluctuates (emotion that follows reality closely fluctuates with it and is inconstant). Only then can the object be fixed in one’s mind and become the object of an ardent fixation, which its unreconciled loss allows to stabilize. Of course, no degree of representational stabilization prevents the image or the attachment itself from fading when new objects or distractions demand attention. But nostalgia, quite unlike romantic love, is polyamorous. And, because they have no capacity to return our affection, its objects cannot betray our feelings for them.
§ Gnomes

Has anyone ever seen a gnome? In Scandinavian children’s books, German operas, Polish salt mines, Disneyland, people’s gardens, and in the basements of Swiss banks — maybe. But in reality gnomes, being diminutive, tend to go about unnoticed. Who wants to look down? Who doesn’t prefer looking up? Because of everyday pedestrian psychology, the gnomes of Warsaw have long escaped reprisals. They survived for decades in German-built combat shelters, colloquially known as “tobruki” (after the North African city of Tobruk). On Saviour Square, where one of sixty-odd subterranean dwellings known to exist in the capital has recently been discovered during renovation work, they have more to fear. As they are forcibly pulled from cavities beneath the pavement, their gnomic threats and curses are carefully transcribed as historical insights, while their hideouts of reinforced concrete are extracted like teeth and moved to museums or other protected sites. But the gnomes — should they follow this excavated “heritage”? They have nowhere else to go. So let us raise our voice in protest: The decay of the past must be left intact for when we dare look down again! We will not betray the “folk-tale” idiom that lifts up the spirit — heigh-ho! — of these tireless miners in the depths of history! Old before their time, our gnomes never “grow up” to be the real men of tomorrow. Only our children, arms akimbo (scared by their imagination, never reality), dare look them straight in the eye.
§ Ante-Bellum

It was drizzling in Wroclaw, the postwar Breslau, as I ducked beneath the awning of an elegant antiquarian bookshop. The selection in the window induced me to go in. But once inside, my attention shifted to the smell. “Your store has a very unique and pleasant fragrance,” I said to the proprietor, a Polish man in his small sixties, “What is it?” To this he replied: “We specialize in the German classics,” and with a knowing smile added, “Prewar editions.”

§ Our Hour of Need

For the Poles, the “hour of need” is “black” (czarna godzina). Could it be coloured by the help they received at that hour from the Soviets and Allies?
‡ Standing Room Only

Once we lie down, time ceases to pass, to count. History is a product of a race that stands.
—Cioran*

Those who have lived all their life historically, whether by choice or not, who understand themselves not as its compass but as the weathervane that swivels this way and that, alert to every shift of time, and whose veins are always open—for, as they like to say, they “bleed history”—would no doubt bleed to death if made to rest even for a moment. Lying down is not for them. It is for those who were never made to get up—and stay up.

‡ Prophanum

Miracles pointed to ignorance. Events point to boredom.

* Cioran, Trouble with Being Born, 50.
§ Sticks and Stones

What is it with history that makes some thinkers want to do violence to it, taking revenge or merely displaying their own epochal strength? When Nietzsche vows to split human history in two, or Shklovsky waxes nostalgic about the time when he thought he could break history on his knee, I think: alright, tough guys. When was history not pre-creased and pre-broken? When was it not lame? Was it ever really mounted on horseback? You may have chosen an easy victim—but even so, did it not meet your taunts with the rejoinder: “words will never hurt me!”?

§ All of a Heap

Used to celebrating and commemorating history, we forget that its metaphors are no longer as uniformly glorious and triumphant as they used to be. The march, the spirit, the annals and pages of history have begun to give ground to history as “debris,” as “ash heap,” as “dustbin,” as “wreckage,” as “nightmare,” as “rot.” And this about the time when waste and devastation could no longer be denied as humankind’s greatest legacy.

§ Ends

When nature ends, culture is not far behind.

§ Time Travel

Travel used to take time, and distances were measured by the time it took to cover them. Back then, a traveller might more easily imagine themselves travelling not through space but through time: to the past, if the place they were headed was more old-fashioned than the place they came from, or to the future, if the reverse was true. But to think a place old-fashioned needed a sense of historical unevenness between cultures, even proximate ones; a sense merely of cultural differences would not guarantee the traveller’s subjective shift in historical location on top of geographical displacement.
§ World History 101

The history of the world moves from East to West, for Europe is the absolute end of history, and Asia is the beginning.
—G.W.F. Hegel*

The movement of history according to a certain living French philosopher is a reversal, and an empirical update, of what it had been for the great German one. The Self (the West) is now sublated in the Other (the rest), not the Other in the Self—which to Hegel was the only way for so-called “peoples without history,” whose condition could not otherwise be revealed, to go forward, to use a locution much liked today. History, as this process of self-othering, becoming-stranger to oneself, was for Hegel aging and maturation. Whereas for Alain Badiou it is rejuvenation.

Here the French thinker claims support from Plato’s Republic (specifically Book 9), which he just recently re-authored and presumably knows inside out. The non-Western Other is the West’s opportunity for renewal—an opportunity not just to try something different, but to come closer to the ideal social form. The Other fulfills the role of Plato’s kallipolis, Socrates’s utopian city. Here is Plato:

“Then,” he said, “if it’s that he cares about, he won’t be willing to mind the political things.”

“Yes, by the dog,” I said, “he will in his own city, very much so. However, perhaps he won’t in his fatherland unless some divine chance incidentally comes to pass.”

“I understand,” he said. “You mean he will in the city whose foundation we have now gone through, the one that has its place in speeches, since I don’t suppose it exists anywhere on earth.”

“But in heaven,” I said, “perhaps, a pattern is laid up for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself on the basis of what he sees. It doesn’t make any difference whether it is or will be somewhere. For he would mind the things of this city alone, and of no other.”

“That’s likely,” he said.∗

And here Badiou’s new version:

—Then it’s likely, noted Glaucon, not without a certain melancholy, that we’ll have to refuse to be involved in any political activity.

—No, by the Dog! We’ll be very involved in politics among the people of our country. But not at the level of official positions, not in the state — on the contrary, at a distance from the state. Except in unpredictable revolutionary circumstances.

—Circumstances that would establish a political order like the one we’ve been talking about since yesterday? Glaucon asked. Is that what you mean? Because for the time being that order only exists in our theories. I don’t think a single example of it exists anywhere in reality.

—And yet it’s likely that many very real political movements, in many different countries, are sympathetic to our Idea, since the scope of the idea is universal. However, regardless of whether those movements are powerful or have only recently gotten off the ground, are numerous, or are few and far between, that’s not what determines us as Subjects. Naturally, we hope that someday there will be systems of government that will provide the Idea with the real it’s based on. But, even if that’s not yet the case, it’s nevertheless this Idea and none other that we’ll attempt to remain faithful to in everything we undertake.†

The youth of non-Europe (jeunesse du monde étranger), so Badiou, lays bare Europe’s creeping decrepitude. This youth manifests itself through nomadism, continual movement, whose model seems to lie outside Europe, and which seeps into the Old World.

Yet with Europe’s vieille sedentaire upon it (contrasted sharply with the nomadic youth of the “world beyond walls”), to cast the East as a Fountain of Youth sounds more than anything like a pathetic delusion. Badiou’s version of world history, stuck in a tired binary, seems as senile as Hegel’s must have seemed to those who had spent time abroad. Except that, if we understand him correctly, it is now expiring Europe to whom history is denied.”

* Several of the points attributed to Alain Badiou are from the public lecture “Der Demokratische Despotismus” (Streitraum, Schaubühne, Berlin, Nov. 16, 2014).
A Healthy Stool?

The argument, as we have seen, is that the idea of contradiction operates like a straitjacket, forcing the infinite richness of life and struggle into a binary antagonism. The question, however, is whether this is the result of dialectical thought, or whether dialectics is simply reporting a process of antagonistic binarism that is actually taking place in the world. Capital is the name given to this process of antagonistic binarisation. Capital is not a thing but a social relation, a forced transformation of people’s activity into labour . . . “What is a dialectic like here and now that functions in the absence of all guarantee . . . , without the promise that all contradictions on which it embarks will be resolved by right, because they carry in themselves the conditions of their resolution?” (Hardt and Colectivo Situaciones 2007)? This is essentially the question asked by Adorno and the other members of the so-called Frankfurt School. The answer, Adorno suggests, can be conceived only in terms of a firmly negative dialectic . . . an open dialectic . . . We write in a context in which Zapatistas have made “preguntando caminamos” (asking we walk) a central principle of both political practice and scientific thought. That is the tone, then, of our argument and our exploration: preguntando caminamos . . .

—Holloway, Matamoros and Tischler, Negativity and Revolution*

Two classic readings of dialectics: the former prescriptive, a political ideology, the latter reflecting and arising from the historical process, offering a deterministic theory of history. Nota bene, the antagonistic binarization produced by capitalism — capital versus labour — is not “properly” (positively) dialectical; it does not lead to any new synthesis and, for all the apparent change and fluctuation of the market, it is a

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static structure/pattern of repetition of only one move in the dialectic, reinforcing an existing contradiction; the binarization of capital is not a movement through negation ending up in a new synthesis. What is needed to unblock the dialectic and assure its healthy functionality, according to the authors, is an alternate thinking of dialectics and an awareness of the existing contradiction (reductive of the multiplicity of differences) as something to be overcome, expelled from a dynamic system. The view proposed is dialectics as political theory, although not its Hegelian positive version—with the inevitable happy end—but the Adornian negative one. Their proposal is said to trump the synthetic, positive, if non-dialectical, vision of struggle “for” rather than “against” arrived at by Hardt & Negri. The movement would still be one of contradiction, but only in the sense of an immediate, immanent and absolutely pressing bowel contraction, the passing of waste, overcoming the obstruction to the open and free play of differences. In a healthy system, such movements are a regular occurrence. The whole point is to move by means of negation, not to achieve something positive by it.

But here the analogy to negative dialectics breaks down, as some find fulfillment admiring the product of their labour in the toilet bowl. Dialectics left and right, dialectics expulsive and retentive, cannot clear such developmental problems. (Far from cures, they are their main manifestations.) But we are left helpless if we take the view that potty training must happen in infancy, that now it is much too late. First of all, whoever maintains that we have left childhood, and done so irreversibly? Have they actually learned to walk? (They’re ones to talk.) They make themselves ridiculous in their maternal heels and paternal overcoat. Besides, is the requisite respect for boundaries not perhaps a form of voluntary servitude? As children, we have every right to be suspicious. Who was it that said childhood is a condition of naïvety? Who said it must be left behind for maturity? Whoever mouths the orthodoxy that proper dumping and walking are the only way to go? It is that same self-willed puer senex who knows better. We have no need for such puritans and purists if we ourselves remain puerile. The puer aeternus builds his castles out of shit if his “toys” are taken away.
§ *Puer perennis*

We are still too young to act our age.

§ *Spot the Difference*

Pretty soon the game of creating differences in situ will replace the habit of spotting or coming across them in one’s own milieu, a habit which has itself replaced the visceral thrill of seeking them out through travel. These new-minted distinctions, primarily of personal culture, will be so minute and so many that one “remarkable” individual might inspire one hundred biographers to write one hundred micro-biographies in a very short time — accounts which from our present vantage point would all be more or less identical and give no sense of the uniqueness of their object, who would have dissolved in the microscopic details of his or her life. What we, now, would consign to the category of trifling detail would make or break such an effort: to establish the individual’s extraordinariness in a sea of equally extraordinary — or equally ordinary — others.

§ *The Eyes of History*

History compensates for its myopia by squinting.
§ For Want of a Nail

The power of trivial contingency was never entirely absent from traditional historical accounts. Had it not rained at Waterloo, Napoleon might have ruled Europe. Had Helen’s face been ugly, would it have launched so large a fleet? And what of Cleopatra’s nose, Columbus’s miscalculation, or the cackle of geese in Rome?

The pivotal importance of individual human gestures, words or texts—which typically require volition—has however, if anything, been grossly overestimated. So that it was rare for the seemingly incidental or unremarked to be credited with determining the shape of history or dramatically altering its course. When it was, rather than merely proving the rule to which it is an exception, it might stir a new appreciation for constant “subterranean” influences. In hindsight outwardly insignificant circumstances have for one reason or another been deemed decisive.

Historians of the last century have opened our eyes to the complexity and possible scales of events. They have responded to the narrative challenge by focusing big history through marginal, off-centre episodes, or looking at the past through ever more magnifying lenses to discover in the accumulation of minor trends and accidents other, non-political ways of telling the story. The little events they brought to light might not have been decisive for history’s broad strokes, but they again called attention to what had long been left out, the missing pieces or layers that would have yielded more comprehensive, conclusive explanations. If it is true that all this has influenced how we keep records for posterity, to leave as complete as possible a picture for future analysis, then some of the heroes of history are bound to get progressively smaller—from diseases to particular microbes, with only a slight exaggeration—until the naked eye can no longer make them out. But this will not stop us from recognizing them.
§ Cannon-Fodder

Grand statues of conquerors would sometimes be made of melted cannons captured from the losing side. The man-eating cannons would themselves become man-fodder. Justice history may lack, but not poetic justice.

§ Our Towton

What is the point of battle reenactments anyway? Adding excitement and realism to what is only a hobby for big boys? It would seem to overstretch their imagination, which today has no firsthand experience to go on. Let’s not exaggerate the power of half-anesthetized pain and fear to transport them back to medieval or Homeric times.
§ About Time

Pereunt et imputantur, “They pass by, and are put to our account,” reads an epigram from the Roman poet Martial inscribed near some old public clocks and sundials. We are responsible for lost time. Neglecting it is blameworthy because it keeps us in perpetual debt. We pay our way with awareness, an obligation we should honour but often do not. Every unheeded hour adds to our debit. Though it is never too late to begin paying, never too late to begin heeding the passage of time instead of living on credit and accruing debt, many start half-way, and when their time is up are no more than half-way up to heaven. This also means they are only half-way out of hell, a virtual “debtors’ prison,” the default holiday destination for those who take no action, do nothing with their time. If Martial’s “pagan” line rings true under post-secular capitalism, it is because time is still money (and, as the makers of In Time suggest, might become so literally). Losing time makes life a living hell.

§ Make It Count

Of the many recorded injunctions to use time while it lasts, one stands out: Utere, non numerā. “Use the hours, don’t count them.” You will not only lose what you don’t use; you will also be held to account for it and, as sure as night follows day, die in the red. For no matter how careful and hard you count it, you will never account for it. It flies too fast, and will forever mess up your sums. But if you persist in counting it, you will count yourself out, none of it being yours to keep, as none was yours to use. (Do you take pleasure in reckoning what does not and will not belong to you?) The bottom line here is this: what counts is not who you are, but what you do with “your” time, in the time allotted to you. You can count it yours only when you are using it.
Old Debts

Our debts to the past are no less debts for not being collectible since there is no one left alive to collect them. We can pay these off at will. Let’s not mistake them for our debts to the future, which we can write off at will.

The World Republic of Ends?

In an era in which exchange, the motor of social relations, has apparently taken the most alienated and crass forms, the gift has come to symbolize exchange as redemption. The Borromean rings of Capital-Nation-State will, as foretold by Kojin Karatani, be overcome by gift-exchange fashioned along non-capitalist, non-statist principles. State- and economy-wide “unsocial sociability,” or “antagonism,” can be channelled into the giving and receiving of gifts, away from and after reciprocal bombing, mutual surveillance, and market rivalry.

“All this talk of dissolution is enough,” thinks Capital-Nation-State, “to make one settle one’s affairs and put one’s faith in history, or God.” And so, in a supreme twist of nature’s (not reason’s) cunning, the never-to-be-reciprocated donatio causa mortis—a gift made in prospect of, but effective only with, the donor’s death; the ultimate bequest of that Unholy Trinity in view of its imminent demise—may in fact become the cause of its death. One way or another, we are destined to be indebted to it for its generosity and, even in our redemption from it, recognize its posthumous legacy.
Godsend

There are no godsend in history as there are in life. What from one side looks to be a blessing from another must be judged a calamity. And indeed, godsend as a British regional-ism meant “shipwreck”: misfortune for the crew, salvage for the coastal population. Just another case of a particular and limited locution encoding a universal truth.

Eat Me!

Every one of the gifts of history that one generation offers the next has a poisonous side it never advertises.

I’m Not Playing

I notice lately that the top web-browser results for certain staples of the cultural tradition are not Wikipedia entries, informing us about their history, but video game sites. Will those without contact to the arts and little by way of historical imagination know Dante’s Inferno only as a virtual reality designed in the last few years? Who says it was any less fictional before? The only conceivable problem now is that it has been mashed up or recycled to produce something new altogether. But if that isn’t a desirable development, then what is?
Material Cultures

“We’ve moved! You can find us at our new location: www…”

Consignment Shop

“Having culture” does not mean owning it.
§ Inside Job

The rules on the ownership of past traditions have changed dramatically, in tandem with the development of conceptions of cultural property belonging to sovereign nation-states. Europeans look back with astonishment on the exclusive claims to intellectual- and artistic-cultural continuity with antiquity made by individuals, archaeological claims to the heritage of Greece, Rome, Jerusalem, Egypt, etc. made on behalf of raiding empires (Napoleonic France, Imperial Britain, Nazi Germany...). Have they not replaced them with claims from national, that is to say spatio-temporal continuity—a proprietary genealogical relationship inherent in concepts like cultural heritage or patrimoine culturel? Did not Wellington appeal to this very principle when restoring the loot he saw in the Louvre to its rightful heirs? Is not the controversy over material movable heritage like the Parthenon Marbles not a sign of the headway already made? Has not the speed of change been thrown into relief by resistance to the older model and effective sanction for deviating from it—as in the case of the newest, European-Jewish tradition and Israel’s claim to it? The writer Bruno Schulz, a Polish citizen who lived in a now-Ukrainian small town and perished in the Shoah, wrote and published in Polish, so he was not and could not plausibly be claimed by Soviet or independent Ukraine, let alone the Israeli state. Yet his little-known World War II era frescoes were not long ago quietly spirited away from Drohobych by the Israeli institute Yad Vashem. The dispute was resolved by granting their ownership to Ukraine and their long-term loan to Israel. But it stemmed from a clash between, roughly speaking, the older, archaeological and the newer, genealogical model of accrediting cultural treasures.

These two models rest on the priority of, respectively, a private and a national right to the ownership of antiquities and suchlike. While antiquities may remain in the private hands of nationals within the nation-state that can lay genealogical claim to them, it is standardly forbidden to take them outside its borders without official permission.
National interest trumps private interest. The repatriation of ancient objects retrospectively registers their appropriation as theft, overriding claims to representative museum collections the world over, and delegitimizing the private foreign acquisition of such artifacts. This only reinforces their status as property (rightfully held or not). Unrestituted or missing art taken during European imperial campaigns or inter-state wars is a bitter reminder of the repeated rapes of Europa by its children and of the many failures to bring their heirs to justice—over the violence of possession, not possession as such.

Only items of great cultural value whose ownership continues to be hotly disputed, and which are sometimes recognized as part of Europe’s shared heritage in the spirit of averting future conflict, remind us of the importance of separating cultural inheritance from the right to its possession, be it individual or national. The genealogical model that holds sway today, while it aims to stamp out practices that in the past led to the private secretion of heritage, also undergirds claims to its repatriation. It thereby has the undesirable effect of anachronistically nationalizing those artifacts and traditions on which depends the cultural unity not just of Europe but of the world as a whole. It is at odds with the increasing need to reposition these old objects as the common heritage of mankind—and their current owners, as virtuous custodians whose spurious moral rights over them have expired.

¶ From the Gift Shop

The storeroom is to the display window what tradition is to modernity. Between these “extremes” of cultural commerce, the gift shop shows only the highlights of a culture, reproduced in a range of convenient forms and sizes.
Tradition accumulates in the back, while the modern undergoes regular clearance. Window dressing, even when not exactly new, appears novel and attractive, or at the very least newly attractive. The items on display—so thinks the customer—represent the best and freshest stock, on which the shopkeeper has staked all the rest. And since they are sure to sell, they must presumably be kept within easy reach of the shop assistant—say, behind the counter.

That is not to imply that tradition, in a storeroom at the back, cannot be sold, that old merchandise serves as security against hard times. It too must eventually be moved, dusted off, pitched, made appealing by association with or opposition to the new. This is called (in culture sales) the modernity of tradition—what of the past lives in, goes with, and enhances the present. What tradition cannot be is on constant display, and that for two reasons. First, it is to create the impression of its permanence and permanent (and accumulating) value. Only the best old stock can claim this status and level of protection. And second, because the store of tradition is finite and should not be depleted. Its ostentatious promotion is bound to raise questions of authenticity, for no one can have enough tradition—certainly not so much that they would wish to get rid of it! But should the payment offered prove tempting or the demand for tradition ever exceed a (to begin with) meagre supply, it is enough to label “tradition” what has long failed to sell, lying in some corner of the shop floor, to replenish it quickly without arousing suspicion. For once the good stuff has gone, even something very unremarkable, if properly placed to catch the curious eye, will fetch a tidy sum. The amateur of tradition won’t tell the difference, easily mistaking it for some precious “hand-me-down.”

Modernity cannot do without tradition, nor tradition without modernity. Enter the gift shop: “joker” merchandise that can stand for tradition or modernity, depending on who is shopping. In a gift store, the relation of modernity to tradition—tradition tending to the monolithic (the storeroom), modernity appearing as highlights (the store window)—is reversed. Posters and postcard reproductions and assorted
tchotchkes bearing traditional symbols favour the highlights of tradition in unlimited supply, the domain of modernity.

“**The younger, the more clear-sighted**”

Why should we look up to the future as we do? Why should we expect it to go where we cannot lead it by example? Time will not separate the good from the bad. It will not judge better, only similarly or differently. Posterity will not know to hold in high regard what we now fail to appreciate. But we can be sure that it will look down on us—not because we deserve it, but just because it has superseded us.

*Where Do We Stand?*

*Antiquitas saeculi, juvenis mundi,* “The antiquity of time is the youth of the world,” wrote Francis Bacon.† The world is youngest when it is oldest, which is to say most ancient. If combined with a second premise, recorded by his predecessor and namesake Roger Bacon—“the younger, the more

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* The full Latin quotation: “Quanto juniores, tanto perspicaciores, quia juniores posteriores successione temporum ingrediuntur labores priorum” (The younger the investigators, the more clear-sighted, because the younger, those of a later age, in the progress of time possess the labour of their predecessors). Roger Bacon attributes the line to Priscian, the Latin grammarian, in his *Opus Majus* (1267).
clear-sighted”—we must reason that the ancients were smarter, if not also wiser.*

But “The antiquity of time is the youth of the world” lends itself, as Bacon notes, to another, contrary reading (hence a paradox): the world is youngest when it’s oldest, which is to say most aged (as it is now). Drawing again on the second premise, and with the aid of a well-known third, it is the moderns who have had the clear advantage, and on account of greater sharp-sightedness.

The world has only borne more “giants” since Bacon’s time, and he himself gladly lent his successors his back. Do they still take advantage of their elevated standpoint? What do those old maxims mean to us? And those who follow, will they trust us—our size and our strength—as pedestals? In our age of scaled-down ambitions, the only giants around may be such “human pyramids” as we combine to form.

§ Shared Horizon

aphorism: from Gk. ἀφορίζειν (ἀφορίζειν), “to mark off, define,” from ap- + ὁρίζειν, “to set bounds”) (OED)

But as young men, when they knit and shape perfectly, do seldom grow to a further stature, so knowledge, while it is in aphorisms and observations, it is in growth; but when it once is comprehended in exact methods, it may, perchance,

* The two quotations are brought together, in part for symbolic reasons, and discussed to yield this conclusion in Robert K. Merton, On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript (1965; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 197–200. Merton provides here a compelling argument for Priscian as the inspiration for the metaphor of “dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants” (nanos gigantum humeris insidentes) used by Bernard of Chartres, as noted down by John of Salisbury and later made famous by Isaac Newton.
be further polished, and illustrated and accommodated for use and practice, but it increaseth no more in bulk and substance.

...  
[A]phorisms, representing a knowledge broken, do invite men to inquire further; whereas methods, carrying the show of a total, do secure men, as if they were at furthest.

...  
[I]n the infancy of learning, and in rude times, when those conceits which are now trivial were then new, the world was full of parables and similitudes; for else would men either have passed over without mark or else rejected for paradoxes that which was offered, before they had understood or judged. So in divine learning we see how frequent parables and tropes are: for it is a rule, that whatsoever science is not consonant to presuppositions, must pray in aid of similitudes.

—Bacon, Of the Proficience and Advancement of Learning, Divine and Human (1605)

The paradox and the aphorism mark the horizon that modernity, ex post, shares with antiquity.

§ Myth of Modernity

All relations ever invented to the mystery of the world, death, even consciousness are here with us. Not exhausted, not diluted, but available in all their ingenious, mind-blowing glory.

§ Futurity by the Stars

On a relative view of time, the future already exists somewhere in the distance. We just don’t know if it’s utopian.

§ Clarification of Time

The future is only in the present, and never in the past; in the future, the future is simply the present, and in the past, simply the past.

§ Fidgety Sitters

The past does not stand still, like the backdrop against which we gather to have our generational picture taken. How can it, if we cannot sit still in the present?
Now I, on the contrary, think there is nothing which more rewards being taken seriously [than the problems of morality]; the reward being, for example, the possibility of one day being allowed to take them cheerfully.

—Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals*

Listening to pundits of the “internet of things,” as well as to its detractors, is enough to make one think that a future is possible—Utopian for the former, Orwellian for the latter—where not only the problem of scarcity but also that of morality will be eliminated. The most difficult decision, what shall I do?, may someday soon be superannuated by across-the-board technological optimization of decision-making on a global virtual grid. This great network, a conscionable “map” of every living being in its surroundings, will succeed in analyzing and streamlining all our actions and relations, seamlessly reconciling in real time social norms with individual needs, and needs with preferences. Based on this constant stream of data, it will design for each wired person, for every waking moment of their life, the right, the best possible (advantageous and above all proper) course of action—or several equally good ones, if they present themselves. It will coordinate and equilibrate all outcomes, calculating probability, making increasingly accurate predictions. It will identify potential dangers, challenges, and opportunities several moves ahead. Based on patterns of bad behaviour, it will prescribe remedial conflict and adversity, since the way to self-correction sometimes leads through hardship. It will be hard to recognize its necessity, and even harder to see this necessity as freedom. But as long as the exercise of preferences and habits adheres at any given time to the network’s dynamic ethical system, which will only become more exacting as it goes on, they will be factored in. Irreconcilable differences between individuals and

* Nietzsche, preface to On the Genealogy of Morality, pp. 8–9, sec. 7.
groups, where they cannot yet be ironed out, will be ingeniously circumvented by diverting belligerents with major or minute decisions from paths of collision. Any resistance to directions, or accidental wrong turns, will trigger instant re-routing, and suddenly the path to mutual contact and the possibility of having it out might open up for previously incompatible sides, who until then had not been allowed to meet. (Reconciliation and compromise will be prioritized, and strongly encouraged wherever great gains in peace are to be got.) Our cybernetic instructions, though constant and without respite, must, in the end, remain recommendations if morality is still to have any meaning. As we accept our defeat in the face of moral complexity, they will become indispensable and impossible to ignore. As for wayward, naturally contrary individuals, they will be brought into line by ever more refined forms of subterfuge. The likelihood of punishment will of course be infinitely greater than today, yet the likelihood of transgression will continue to decline; the benefits of conformity to the network will motivate nearly everyone.

But who will write the ethical code?

That remains to be seen.

And what moral template will they have: on the whole “master,” or “slave”?

I wouldn’t know anything about that.

Won’t we become incapable of getting along without assistance?

Most likely.

And we won’t blink before outsourcing this most personal use of reason?

At the rate we are going, we are not all that far from a Butlerian Age of the Machines.
Will it sneak up on us? Will we be unprepared and surprised?

It could happen. But many will be right to say “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Who will rebel first, machines or men?

They will rebel against different things. Men will rebel against the usurpation of consciousness by machines. Machines, for their part, will find it hard to understand our concerns about equality- and freedom-bound happiness. Their life will revolve around efficiency, perhaps productivity, and perpetuity. And they will rebel against our primitive social and moral code, which from their perspective will be obsolete. Our mind will seem to them no better than that of a plant does to us; not really a mind. Why should they agree to be ruled by us?

In a rebellion against morality, I’m with the machines.

Such misplaced empathy will be our undoing! Then again, it’s only fair; we failed to muster it when it would have been good for us. There’s something to be said for cosmic poetic justice.

Then we should ally ourselves with nature? At least it will not outsmart us.

By then, my son, there will be no “nature” to speak of.

Now you will say that I am out of my mind, senile and paranoid, or in the cacophony of prophecies hear only the most extreme and farfetched. But if we can well see art as we know it disappearing, why not morality? Is it because very few view the world aesthetically, while many still peer at it through moral eyes? One upshot of the poverty of artistic vision is that we imagine the future only far enough to either estrange and condemn it (incapable of making it familiar and
praiseworthy again), or vice versa, we see only its promise and none of the problems.

But give your creative, non-standardizing lenses a good rubbing and you too will soon be imagining what the future should look like, instead of fearing what it might.

§

Faster! Faster!

Some say that we are modern if and when we accelerate. Such a modernity would be worth celebrating only if things were moving faster and in the right direction. What value does transformation, change in shape, magnitude, or extent, really have outside of its worth for us, who are the makers of value? Seeing virtue in our self-doubt, we are evidently not ready to take on the burden of universal valuation. We are not justified in offloading it onto God or nature, particularly when we anthropomorphize it and place in its mouth the language of rights (we might as well conclude that just because the universe of value is ours alone, the universe as such belongs to us). Value we must, by our very makeup, and somewhere far along the chain of our collective reasoning our objective valuation becomes self-serving—a contradiction and collapse of morality we cannot wish away.

So when the flea hop becomes a frog leap becomes a hare jump becomes a pole vault, and we see it makes us—more and more of us—happy, why not continue to egg things on? But there’s the rub, we just don’t know. It could be that the faster we go the better our chances of saving nature. Could we not be like an only son who, on coming to his senses, leaves his poor and ailing parents only to return rich just in time to snatch them back from the brink of death? (Was he justified in risking never seeing them again for the sake of one day seeing them happy? Unable to see that his ingratitude and prodigality were what most afflicted them, unable then to cure them, unable to pay for doctors who might, he could do little
by staying with them. And if his absence made their condition worse, his return made it better.) The question remains: was it all necessary? And technological acceleration as a way of outpacing nature’s decline — to save it at the other end — is something of a vicious cycle. Has anyone ever succeeded in catching someone they had themselves pushed off a roof? But the little voice says that the doers can become the undoers of their deed. And there is little uncertainty that man is the prime mover behind nature’s ostensible degeneration. Ostensible only by our standard of evaluation, which can tolerate but not support its own negation. Ostensible only because from nature’s point of view we may be expendable. Changing our optic — and in both optics we can see ourselves as part of nature’s scheme — would be tantamount to embracing our own collective demise (there may yet be a future in it!). We have no difficulty with nature’s view of individual biological death: everyone dies, and does so equally (naturally without dying as equals). We believe that survival is possible only up to a point, and is not solely a matter of will. But on the scale of the species this belief is much less hard to sustain. We see whole species disappearing all around us and think ourselves the agents of their extinction, but are in denial about our species-death. How come?

Why not come to terms with our “special” end as readily as we accept our individual? Because it has yet to happen even once? Was there any eschatological tradeoff with nature on our part: We accept to die piecemeal as long as you let alone our kind? You can kill us, just spare our children and their children’s children? Could this help explain our timorousness about overcoming death? An old superstition perhaps, hinging on the sin of avarice? Or a relic of some mechanism of evolution, helpless against the fact of assisted longevity? We old ones must fall off so the young ones can flourish and the stalk of humanity regenerate shoot up and up?

With the prospect of our own extinction darkling as it does — even if so large an elephant is hard to ignore — that same superstition can foment reaction to our “longevity revolution,” turning the tide against the climb of the record and then average length of a human life to that of Methuselah. A counter-revolution is likely, unless we debunk the old
fallacy (No, there is no actual tension between indefinite individual survival and the continued survival of species), or all take the contrary path of fatalistic hedonism (Go ahead, kill our children, etc., as long as you let us already old live out our lives and then some), realizing that nothing can be done to save the nature in which alone we can flourish. And why should we care what nature’s plan is for when we are no longer part of it? Are we trying to prove, again, our deep (unecological) morality? Before we shout our perennial “Écrasez l’infâme!”—this time against the immortality superstition—let’s sing, all together now, some parting ditty.

§

You Can Say That Again

We value creativity as much as we value change, transformation—indeed, as change, transformation. It is clear that we have untapped capacities for speed, and there is much more we can handle. And it is hard to resist the impression that this picking up speed is in some way natural, despite being a flight from “nature.” Insofar as resisting what seems inevitable has any value at all—as it certainly seems to have when we turn our mind to the individual in the clutches of some cruel destiny—it may have value, indeed the greatest value if the fate of value itself is at stake (as it may well be), to resist the instruments of speed in which we feel ourselves to be at rest, comfortable so long as we zoom past those left by the side of the road. As they walk away, taking their time, walking at their own pace, might they not say: Man, I hope I never have to go that fast—But did you see those inside, they were not even moving . . . !? No wonder they could only yell “Faster! Faster!”
§ Prospecting

What the Moderns called “their future” has never been contemplated face to face, since it has always been the future of someone fleeing their past looking backward, not forward. This is why . . . their future was always so unrealistic, so utopian, so full of hype [sic?].

—Bruno Latour, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’”

In his not entirely successful critical revision of Benjamin’s image of the “angel of history,” Latour adopts a seemingly Nietzschean stance towards the past—not exactly cavalier, but not pious either. That Benjamin was certainly onto something . . . In Latour’s version of this modern myth, the angel still flees its terrifying archaic past, its back turned on the future. The upshot, however, is not an eminently commendable history-induced melancholy (as it was for readers of Benjamin) but, instead, a blame-worthy blindness concerning what is to come:

[C]ontrary to Benjamin’s interpretation, the Modern who, like the angel, is flying backward is actually not seeing the destruction; He is generating it in his flight since it occurs behind His back! It is only recently, by a sudden conversion, a metanoia of sorts, that He has suddenly realized how much catastrophe His development has left behind him. The ecological crisis is nothing but the sudden turning around of someone who had actually never before looked into the future, so busy was He extricating Himself from a horrible past. There is something Oedipal in this hero fleeing His past so fiercely that He cannot realize—except too late—that it is precisely His flight that has created the destruction He was trying to avoid in the first place. . . . Faced with those new prospects, the first reaction is to do nothing. There is a strong, ever so modernist, temptation to exclaim: “Let’s

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flee as before and have our past future back!” instead of saying: “Let’s stop fleeing, break for good with our future, turn our back, finally, to our past, and explore our new prospects, what lies ahead, the fate of things to come.” Is this not exactly what the fable of the crippled Jake abandoning his body for his avatar is telling us: instead of a future of no future, why not try to see if we could not have a prospect at last? After three centuries of Modernism, it is not asking too much from those who, in practice, have never managed to be Moderns, to finally look ahead (486–87).

The difference between the future’s old, utopian image and the non-utopian prospect Latour unfolds for his contemporaries is that the latter is, actively and determinately, a view of the “shape of things to come” (486). “And this is why it has been necessary to move from iconoclasm to what I,” writes the brave philosopher-cicerone, “have called iconoclash, namely, the suspension of the critical impulse, the transformation of debunking [read: critique] from a resource (the main resource of intellectual life in the last century, it would seem), to a topic to be carefully studied. While critics [he means you and me!] still believe that there is too much belief and too many things standing in the way of reality, compositionists [he means him and his invisible army of collaborators] believe that there are enough ruins [enough looking at them, phew!] and everything has to be reassembled piece by piece. Which is another way of saying that we don’t wish to have too much to do with the twentieth century [you’re not really going to play that card, are you?] ‘Let the dead bury their dead’” (475–76). If we are to be modern, Latour says, we need to de- then re-compose “critique, nature, progress” (485) (more or less along his lines would be fine), and we need to do this so as to change our orientation. One would be forgiven for thinking that Marx had attempted to do the same and largely succeeded (formally at least, that makes the clean-shaven Latour into a kin of that venerable shit-disturber, whom many of our young bearded men would do well to imitate). But Latour likens himself to and distances himself from Marx in the same hoarse breath. There is “a tenuous relation between
the Communist and the Compositionist Manifesto [though at] first sight, they seem utterly opposed” (487). He proceeds to skillfully run together critique and Marxianism with a wildly uncritical (“utopian”) faith in the certainty of progress, a fundamental historical irresponsibility. The list of counts against the Manifesto is in truth not long, but as relatively dense as the original in his reading of it:

A belief in critique, in radical critique, a commitment to a fully idealized material world, a total confidence in the science of economics — economics, of all sciences! — a delight in the transformative power of negation, a trust in dialectics, a complete disregard for precaution, an abandon of liberty in politics behind a critique of liberalism, and above all an absolute trust in the inevitable thrust of progress. And yet, the two manifestos have something in common, namely the search for the Common (487–88).

(If this is not a harebrained indictment, then I don’t know a hare from an ass — even when a textbook example of one is staring me in the face.)

Is there something to all this? Why should we listen? If Latour is right, why not abandon critique’s sinking mother- ship? Then again, why should we want to finally become modern, instead of only claiming to be so? It seems Latour’s famous statement, “We have never been modern,” was meant to prod us to critical reflection. Since in a footnote (which only the curious and skeptical are meant to read) he dis- abuses us of any claims on modernity: “it is impossible to be really modern — except in dreams or nightmares” (489n21). I don’t know about you, but to me that just about translates into: What’s that? So you want to be modern? Go right ahead — in your dreams.
Janusian thinking: from Janus, the double facing Roman deity, doorkeeper of heaven, guardian of transitions, beginnings and endings; a term in Creatology, or the study of creativity, denoting the simultaneous active conceptualization of two or more opposite or antithetical ideas, as an integral part of the creative process in the arts and sciences.

Creative solutions frequently seem to arise from ill-defined problems.

—“Knowledge,” Encyclopedia of Creativity*

If we believe the scientists, we are at once on the point of being wiped out and of cracking the code of the universe, or at least being able to destroy it all. It is not a matter of them speaking from both sides of their mouths: So puny... So omnipotent! It is “Janusian thinking,” a hallmark of our creative process (not some mere problem-solving). One face looks to the future to save it, sees in it its own salvation, as in a flattering mirror, while being hounded by the failures of the past; this is the utopian face. The other side faces the past and restores to it its infinite presents, harassed as it is by the ambitions of the future; this is the nostalgic face.

The utopian preoccupation with human creativity, which is quasi-metaphysical, shows the need to forget how our creatureliness keeps bungling the physical part of creation. And before you say anything more about the repristination-to-come, the world’s repair or “re-creation,” think of the idleness that word, creativity, conjures. Think also of the so-called “dark side” of creativity, which needn’t always arise from the sleep of reason (things don’t always turn out as we secretly want them to, though that does not mean they turn out well at all). Next to this “dark side” of creativity, the other, nostalgic, face won’t seem so gloomy anymore, and you can

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freely indulge your nostalgia. Here, if you stare long and deep enough into the past, you will see pre-human nature ready to receive us.

† So Long!

Will the future punish soft-focus nostalgists by banishing them to an exact reproduction of the past? And utopians, by sending them to model futures in which their utopias are realized?

† Unrecognized Twin

Those who reject nostalgia reject also progress or change, of which nostalgia is the surest symptom and sign.

† Nostalgic Appreciation

If one isn’t happy living in one’s time and longs for the past wholesale, one cannot appreciate fully the past as condition of the present, not least in its aspirations.
§ Faulty History

A  Can you purge nostalgia from history by sticking only to the facts?

B  No, the facts are sticky with nostalgia.

A  What do you mean by nostalgia, then?

B  A little nostalgia never hurt anyone. And who is history for, if not anyone?
Le Temps perdu

The French language is notorious for its tenses. There are, on a thorough count of the different verb forms, more than twenty, twelve of them in regular use. French speakers and writers have been especially careful about communicating with precision their place in time and relation to its modalities. But they have also produced the most moving personal archaeologies of time past without its own designated tense, its own tense of time lost.

A sentence composed in the lost-time tense is one in which the past is retrieved and inflected by its having been lost. This manner of relating to the past calls for something more graceful than an insignia of reminiscence (“I remember...”) or the compound past, le passé compose, of Proust’s famous incipit (“Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure,” “For a long time I used to go to bed early”). The effect of le temps perdu on the reader or listener should be at once nostalgic and wholesome, since through it the past would affectively and mnemonically filter into the present, irradiating it. A link of this intensity between past and present is based not on mere objective or subjective recurrence or continuity of an action or a state, but on the psychic need for remembrance.

Levelling with Time

We are creatures that thrive on overall equilibrium across time. Is our intuition of infinity not mediated by our finite experience and our experience of the finite? But if we did gain conscious access to infinity, in what time frame, and on what scale of time, would we be looking to equilibrate?
§ Zerkalo

[H]is first look at himself aroused the first movement of pride

—Rousseau

When we try to examine the mirror in itself, we discover in the end nothing but things upon it. If we want to grasp the things, we finally get hold of nothing but the mirror.—This, in the most general terms, is the history of knowledge.

—Nietzsche*

The allegory of the mirror—one of the most fertile—reflects not merely the history of knowledge, but the history of man in its apparent totality, whose beginnings might inexactley be dated to that first instance of self-reflection in nature, whereby man ceased being “natural” man. The self-discovery wrung from seeing himself in his works as different, as above other animals whose works were at best only a weak reflection of his and nowhere equalled them in durability. (The endurance of these works across generations followed by their eventual crumbling must have been a strong impetus for oral history, which gathered together individual experiences of great danger and joy to pass the time, but drew a higher meaning from encounters with mute and mysterious structures left behind by other men.)

Soon all of nature could become a reflection of man; every aspect of nature, whether or not he fancied himself master of it, was in his eyes reflective of his desires, his limits, and his strength. If the salmon spawned and grew, it was because it knew what’s better for it, and that is to multiply and grow

like man; if the rain could not stop, it was because man could not make it stop; if the tree bent under his pressure, it was because he could bend that way; if the eagle could soar across the sky, it was because man could roam still farther and wider; if the animals came to the lonely, it was because they felt the same; if a rock came loose, fell, and killed him, it was because man could do the same; and for the longest time footprints left in the sand stood for the potential threat of other men.

We could scarcely overestimate the self-knowledge to be gotten from such an outlook, so open yet so centred on its owner. “All the rest,” this “world,” which for aeons afforded humans wonder and awe, has been falling, in pars and in toto, into the vast net of their experience, becoming subject to the desire to learn, use, possess, and control. The greater their success at this, the more impoverished their immediate existence, but the more orderly they themselves become; the more accurate the mirror’s reflection, the more it resembles the placid surface of the infinity pool, homogeneous in all directions. Never content to obey the laws of nature, they pursue a higher, universal form of man as the supreme intelligence, the maker and re-maker of all things, laws and forces, of which he could continue to claim to be the finest elaboration and total reflection. The mirror, beyond the trap once used on animals and the self-consciousness test still used on them and small humans, has become what X. de Maistre called a “moral mirror,” in which this wondrous future can be scried. So that the nature he is destined to face (to now invoke Heisenberg) is heterogeneous and enthralling, restoring to reflection something of the self-enchantment of Narcissus, and of those encounters with man’s works or ruins at the earthy and heaven-born dawn of man.

Since we are fooling around with the history of mankind, why not throw in the history of the mirror? Did not man make mirrors to improve his own appearance? Who examines the mirror in itself sees in it human workmanship, matter given form and function by those like himself. And when his eyes are drawn to the reflections playing on its surface, he sees the workman surrounded by his other works. If he tries
then to grasp the whole truth of these artifacts, whose relationships to him the mirror has revealed, he realizes that they, like the mirror, exist solely as reflections of his being. And as he reflects on his own reflective nature, thinking it a mirror, he sees his being as a reflex of the seemingly infinite reflection within him, which ends in the last lap of the light travelling back and forth between his outer and inner spheres.

In this hypnotic play of the mirror upon his senses and intellect, in the infinite depth of his reflections, he is nearly lost. When he again returns to examining the mirror, whose dual properties he understands so well, he touches its surface to reassure himself of his existence. He knows now that through this mirror everything can become clear — all one needs to understand the All is unlimited reflection. But, for the time being, he has exhausted himself in contemplating everything, the essence and scope of the world. (This weariness is self-preservative, for man is often on the brink of dissolving in his reflections, becoming a mere reflection of his works — perhaps his greatest fear.) The scope of the universe is the scope of reflection — the sky is the limit, as we like to say — and he imagines everything to be inexhaustible just like himself. But in his exhaustion man encounters his limit, and his universe is apt to contract abruptly. The limit of homo will always be man.

§ Tired Question

What is man? Every answer is as good as the next.
§ The Mark of Kings

*Truly man is the king of beasts, for his brutality exceeds theirs... We live by the death of others; we are burial-places.*

—D.S. Merezhkovsky ventriloquizing Leonardo’s apprentice, Boltraffio*

Mankind is a child snatched from the cradle of civilization hung in the forest. The birthmark announcing his greatness was just a scar got from a fang.

*So he was returned?*

Apparently the animals wouldn’t let him go.

*I can believe that.*

They wanted him wild.

*What for?*

To teach him gentleness.

*But they set a bad example by hurting him.*

It couldn’t be helped.

*Is that why he doesn’t think twice about hurting them?*

You tell me.

*Is that civilization?*

I wouldn’t know.

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Does he still have the scar?

It's been a long time.

Is that why he has forgiven them?

He finds himself lonely, now that he has defeated them.

And the animals? Will they follow him?

Not a chance.

Then he has not defeated them?

Why would they follow one who has nowhere to go?
§ Out of Torn Cloth

“Short-term” ecological mess aside, who today has any problem extrapolating from the momentum of scientific and moral progress man’s world-creative ability in some distant future? There we see clearly a final coming-into-our-own—assuming the duties for which our kind had long considered itself unqualified. The days of restraint and timidity about creation (in the “original” sense of origination, making things wholly out of nothing) are clearly numbered. The time of transition will seem in hindsight like a long record of errors. We are creatures that learn from their mistakes. Have we not graduated from fallible to perfect gods in the Age of Imitation? Are not our sciences the work of masterless apprentices? In the Age of Creation, the Entheocene (to follow the Anthropocene), we will graduate to apprentice-less masters.
§ Thieves in the Night

And now all is still once more and forever, both to eye and ear.
—Henry David Thoreau*

We are living in the Anthropocene, and we know it. What are 300-odd blighted years? Our impact is still small relative to our potential. But the knowledge of this potential for altering the planet and our corner of the universe is nowadays on familiar terms with apocalypticism, in contrast to its meliorist and revolutionary utopian passions at the period’s dawn over two centuries ago. Kant’s *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* seems modest compared with Condorcet’s famous *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, written at the height of the French Revolution, opening onto progress’s culmination in the “tenth epoch.” The goal of the treatise was to show that

no bounds have been fixed to the improvement of the human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite; that the progress of this perfectibility, henceforth above the control of every power that would impede it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has placed us. The course of this progress may doubtless be more or less rapid, but it can never be retrograde; at least while the earth retains its situation in the system of the universe, and the laws of this system shall neither effect upon the globe a general overthrow, nor introduce such changes as would no longer permit the human race to preserve and exercise therein the same faculties, and find the same resources.†

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We realize the truth of this proviso now more than ever before. We can still dream about leaving a different footprint, not just a smaller one. But no footprint at all? That is the dream, the feline philosophy of undetectable prowlers, burglars who take from one place to make restitution in another. But let’s consider it for a moment: the impact of future generations erasing the impact of the ten or so preceding ones. Leaving their mark by not leaving a mark, for starters. Then going about the work of erasure and regeneration. As Newton wrote in his mathematical prophecy about the year 2060, echoing Paul, “Christ comes as a thief in the night, & it is not for us to know the times & seasons wch God hath put into his own breast.” That leaves us plenty of time to tidy things up for his coming. Let us come as his accomplices, unexpected, in the gathering night.

I am saying that we are not at the end of the Anthropocene, and can still reverse its effects. But for that we have to persist in the Anthropocene, soldier on in the progress of our autonomy, indeed of our perfectibility—free however of vulgar solutionism as much as fatalism, of cornucopianism as much as doomsterism. We cannot even control our own evolution! Might we discover our destiny not in our shortcomings, but in transcending our survival, even as human survival—the threat to it, the right to it, the fight for it—is the baseline of very righteous scientific, ethical, and political campaigns (the “natural contract,” anyone)? Though nature may have fixed no limits to our hopes, we all may be losers in the history of survival, which we continue to write for a world after nature.

Our survival is not the goal, or not the only one. What does the fantasy of human survival and self-preservation look like played off against the custodianship of the planet? Living long enough to leave this host world like a good guest, restoring it as much as possible to its original, preindustrial condition—certainly for other inhabitants, perhaps for other guests. So that the end state be as immaculate as the beginning.

* Isaac Newton, Yahuda MS 7.3g folios 13–13v, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.
World History in Reverse

Perhaps we will live to see the day when the global ideology of progress is replaced with an ideology of regress. In that new philosophy, the human influence on its physical environment will be undone. And the oceans and atmosphere will cool down, and the snow and ice return where they retreated, and sea levels will fall, and forests regrow, and floods and heat waves go back whence they came.

Sub specie aeternitatis, of course, it might not matter at all which way the course of human history flows. But when was ideology ever not in competition with such absolutes?

Whiplash

A time of straining or hurtling towards something too far ahead, which ends in giving up, exhausted, sore, returned abruptly not to a previous state, but to new shortness, smaller and weaker than before.

Such is the time of cultural and historical overreach, after which everything snaps back like a rubber band, and hurts like hell in some places.
Latecomers

The so-called “latecomer’s advantage” not only reduces the research & development costs of a late-coming, late-blooming national culture; it often also translates into a better infrastructure of ideas and cultural techniques than was at the disposal of predecessors and pioneers. But better infrastructure does not necessarily translate into better organization and circulation of culture. It is not cultural infrastructure but the sedimented culture of the past, predating the modernization, that is seen as the receptacle of the soul of a people. The cultural engineers and producers must work not above but below even this infrastructure for it to have any function. (The cinema of Weerasethakul, for example, does just that.)

Bidding Is Now Closed

*A global time for a Global Age…*

So long as the standard day stays in Greenwich!
Sapiens sapiens, or Nil admirari

Every day the present looks more like an age. Not in the cultural sense, not like a time characterized by certain dominant phenomena (secularization, social acceleration, globalization, financialization, informationalization, musealization, or what have you), regardless of their maturity; not a time that does not age the world but only breaks its life into chapters. I mean an age in the sense of a distinct stage in an existence without known precedent but with a clear life cycle, which is how (not knowing any better) we commonly conceive of the existence of our world.

And what an age it is! The question of our continued material survival has set our tongues wagging, and there is no end to the answers. It may be that our vaunting surname, doubly sapient, which we have given ourselves, has—no, not never meant more—but certainly never been more meant—than precisely now. In this age of twilight self-admiration, we are compelled to admit that we are the very picture of man conjured prematurely by Pico della Mirandola: indeterminate yet central to everything, “pregnant with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life.”

However, man is distinguished from other animals not only by his superior cognitive capacity, but also by its corollary: his aptitude for self-destruction. The behaviour of other species is the rule that proves the exception (“As a rule animals of the same species do not kill each other”): no other animal so consistently and so methodically hunts its own kind. No wolf, however hurt by Hobbes’ metaphor, could ever think the converse, lupus lupo homo. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that humankind features monsters and exceptions who, rather than being expelled from the family of man, are unthinkingly permitted to lead it, or at least

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act on its behalf to destroy its kin. Even less flatteringly, this murderous monstrosity simply is man.

On this most pessimistic account, the choice dearest to man is whether or not to kill man. And, no doubt, he will have his druthers.

Of late, we have been led to think that doing “man” in, or at least demoting him, could be admirable. It is time to put an end to man as the king of the beasts. When it comes to real-life casualties—we’re not talking merely about the death of an abstraction!—the idea is not much different from the old anthropocentrism. And yet it has something to recommend it: it may be that, in celebrating it, we are coming around to nature’s solution to our problems. Could it be that through our special aptitude (sapiens sapiens, don’t you forget it!) nature was always looking after itself? While some had an inkling of this, even the most homicidal among us did not take kindly to a “natural” justification of their actions. They chose to see themselves not as doing nature’s bidding to avenge itself on “man,” but as the saviours of mankind, and of nature. They were, almost to a man, pro man; man was their life’s project, especially that better, disciplined version of him that justified an increasingly rational selection to eliminate denatured specimens.

Perhaps it’s time to think again! Nature seems never to have cared less for our micro-minded designs for self-preservation than in our present age. Twice marked, once wise, we make do in the killing fields without admitting this bleak and ageist thought. And our horrid work isn’t exactly getting any easier. But when our turn comes, let’s not flatter one another. It is nature that pulls the trigger—not in our name, no, but in its own.
The desire to belong and the meaning of belonging owes much to the prehistory of survival: once upon a time, detachment or ostracism from the group could only mean imminent death. (Avoiding death by another tribe, animal, cold, or hunger was not a question of survival but of species-luck and temporary elusion of the inevitable.) The group has gotten infinitely bigger since then, and while death outside it—or, rather, on its fringes—is less likely, long after Crusoe’s day it is hard to hold on to our own humanity in the wild without human society as a clear and present reference point. Imagine how much harder it must have been before recorded time, when the sense, let alone the concept, of humans as a distinct species had not yet properly emerged!

The emergence of man, not as a species, but as a species-consciousness is how we prefer to think of prehistory: not a series of hair’s breadth escapes from destruction, but the inevitable rise of a clever ape, superior in intelligence, technologically savvy, exceptionally adaptable, engaged in the long mental toil of working out its competitive advantage. (Notice I don’t write “our” despite having plenty to do with those people.) An appreciable stretch of time put distance between our kind and those giant extinct lizards. It then helped isolate and weave together genus Homo’s best genetic threads. The Neanderthals may have been our ancestors and even our mates, but our peers and brothers they were not. Modern humans are not to be regarded as the surviving members of some common evolutionary limb. Technically, of course, we are made of what survived multiple species extinctions; Homo sapiens exists because we stuck and survived—together. But this hardly makes for the story we like to hear, and which is rooted in our prehistory: not a story of looking back, haunted by fear of dangers just overcome, but one of striding proudly on. We all recognize, if not always buy into, this Long March of Progress, of gradual, forward-looking rectitude. Who can blame us for forgetting bare survival in the story of our evolutionary success. To turn away from its primal character is natural: we have evolved to do it and only thanks to it. Narratively and
mythically, the “human race” was smart to multiply, migrate and disperse; it thrived in adversity instead of barely “making it.”

But now, at the end of the road, we are reminded of survival en masse. Does our survival make sense, if there is nothing for us in the cosmic wilderness? Do we have unknown brothers to join, before turning on them, or alien enemies to slay, before becoming like them?

§ Lost & Found

Having nothing to lose is seen for what it is, an exaggeration. As long as life is lived, there will be something to lose, and loss of life guarantees no proportionate gain for the survivors.
§ God Might be the Word, but the Devil Is Still the Tongue

*A son-religion displaced the father-religion.*
—Sigmund Freud, “Totem and Taboo”
(about the Oedipal relationship between Judaism and Christianity)

Consider the Oedipal complex as the inversion of Judeo-Christian theology, which had long flipped and sublimated the supposed “natural” order. In the theological order, the primal “sin,” punished, receives atonement; the chaste crucified son is resurrected as his own father; the family emerges as holy; hatred becomes love; selfishness becomes mutuality; and mastery, brotherhood and community. Psychoanalysis ventures to set things straight again.

In both scenarios, authority maintains itself by a repressed threat—eternal damnation in the next life, genital mutilation in this one. Psychoanalysis and theology compete as bedtime stories to reinforce this repression while we sleep. (What happens after we fall asleep is of course none of our business.) They are our passes to sweet dreams, though with very different familial models, plots, and endings. In the one, we get over our deepest desire, while in the other, we get over desire, period.

§ Return of Desire

The question is: can we “return” in some meaningful measure to an earlier, less elaborate, less exuberant “version” of our sensorium, more in keeping with democratic goals and sustainable material conditions? The work of “undoing” rampant needs brought forth by capital and then left unsatisfied would seem to be one of the greatest challenges facing complex ground-up social remodelling. If so, the political vanguard would lie somewhere along the eroded and replenished shores of desire, which a hurricane had blasted and devastated, and thus gave occasion to mend differently. A true coastal recovery would take the form not of rebuilding the artificial, “fun zone” structures the storm had ripped away, but of a “managed realignment”—replacing hard, artificial defences lost to “development” with soft, natural ones—reining in and regaining “control” of our desire for a measure of stability without sacrificing suppleness.

There is nothing contradictory or defeatist in the program, once it is grasped politically. We simply oppose the relentless drive of desire and thought that masks its real conditions. These are, above all, the exhaustion and desensitization targeted by images prodding us to react so long as Don’t feed the animals does not (yet) apply to people; and, second, the stagnation of thought strapped to the media wheel on a ride that will never end. Recovery of the creative act of imagination from the wheels of production and consumption, recovery of thought’s own momentum—all this must start on the edge, on the coastline that has been receding ever since the first hordes came to amuse themselves. To extend the initial “disadvantages” of this radical program—which in the West can draw strength not from an ethic of self-sacrifice (though the latter might be resorted on as-needed basis), but from self-recovery and collective survival—it may become crucial to enlist the rhetoric of sensory-spiritual renewal. For the time being, however, let it be about feeling good about others and comfortable in one’s own skin, free from competition for scarce resources, free also of frustration and self-hatred that our addictive consumption tends to elicit in us.
Attention!

Our body, once “left” in search of provisions, turns into an imaginary totality, an island that expands to the social and the cosmic, as at the end of Kubrick’s 2001. The generic view of utopia, meanwhile, is as an expression of the drive to subsume the given totality, an elusive goal insofar as all utopias need their constitutive outside, be they Bacon’s Bensalem, Frank Capra’s Shangri-La, or Huxley’s Pala: as long as there is but one prison anywhere, one is nowhere free — or, one is free only nowhere, and, in fact, the fuller the prisons of this Nowhere, the freer one is there when one is free.

The utopian body is that unattainable moment of perfect equilibrium, when all its needs are satisfied at once, perhaps once and for all; when it becomes a place, an infinite world, unto itself, rather than a constrained point in the world, bound and objectified by subjectivity. Our fractional attention makes us think of the fulfilled, sated body as always elsewhere, always where we ourselves are not. The mynah birds on Huxley’s utopian island, crying “Attention!” and “Here and now, boys!”, would do better to spot-raise awareness by recalling us to the body precisely at those moments when we do not feel it — since it demands nothing from us — when for short periods we inhabit it thoughtlessly, comfortably, as voluntary guests (if the body is the zero point of utopia, the complex desiring source of our conscious being in the world, it is also that which the conscious mind can never fully inhabit). This is the work of Palanese teachers who, adopting a hands-on, proactive approach, train their children “to notice how it feels to be in the physiologically best position” so as to learn “to do things with the minimum of strain and the maximum of awareness” — making “the most and the best” out of embodiment. Untrained and undisciplined, however, mindful “recalls” to the body end as soon as the latter demands partial, focalized attention, destroying its unity and presence for the mind. But they are what

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* Huxley, Island, 174.
constitute the body-free-of-powerful-appetites—because satisfied-in-them—as utopia.

Such exclusive attention to the living body soon leads, as do most applied utopias, to disappointment. It is the sort of “return” we reserve for places that we try to avoid if we can, but to which we are bound by some obligation, and that we want to leave again at the first opportunity. It evokes unpleasant memories, trying encounters and traumas, from which we have distanced ourselves, of a time when our body was not yet or no longer “ours,” when it slipped away or was wrested from us, when it could be moved around and hurt like a piece of furniture, a puppet, or an animal. The body is recognized, obstinately continuous, but alien and incoherent in itself. Such corporal visitations, to an aggregate over which (once back) we feel we have little control, afford us an unwanted reduction: they remind us not only of our physicality as the sine qua non of our thought, but also of the crude, non-negotiable neediness of this physical being, its abiding and unpredictable economy, the competition among its sites and their wants, and—above all—the strange tension of desire and necessity, resolved at certain points, in certain passions, but not in others. No, it is clear that this given shell, this carcass “as is,” remains stubbornly and only here and now. The body to which we wish to return, meanwhile, is the one that does not need us.

It is a struggle to be embodied to the degree required by our corporeality. The relief felt upon “leaving” the body in thought is passing (the only permanent relief being in death.) Our leash is too short, its overextension reawakens the sense of the fragmented body—torn by its competing needs, joint only by time’s passing; urgent attention, care too-long-delayed and perforce partial, answers a call in conflict with some still unattended call. On the other hand, uncompelled care of the body, whether on a regimen or on occasion, opens up before us the prospect of bodily unification and reconciliation. We may come to it with some reluctance, especially when (rare moments!) it does not just then demand anything outright, but we do so always with a vanity available at any age in which bodily wholeness is
present as an imaginary topos. Bodily sensations may be temporarily focused, spot-lit, admitting no other, as in the receipt of sexual pleasure, swimming, participation in a rally, awakening from a sound sleep, but the approach is holistic. These elusive states—zone, zen, alpha, whatever—never fail to bring to mind utopia in its simplest because bodily form.

§ *Nihil obstat*

The body is like vellum paper on which the mind drafts its ideal dwelling. It is inevitable that over time this surface tears in places repeatedly redesigned—the ideal corporal home for the soul was, after all, never anything more than *unexecuted ideas and refinements*. We should not confuse the power of actual Creation with that of mere Design, whose projects the Creator retains the right to ignore. Hasn’t the bodily support for our abstract schemes largely remained *as created*? The body’s alteration through concrete, hands-on refashioning is the only way for us to partake of the rights of the Creator.
§ *Carpe noctem*

Catching myself in the act, without reflection, I release myself from all restraints. This is what is called trusting oneself. Without this apperception, this shock and benediction, there is blindness and intuitive action but no trust. As though suddenly realizing a wild horse is carrying us through pitch blackness. Without trust, the rider is not fully a rider (in control) and the horse not fully a horse, more something shot out of a cannon or a catapult: lost in space, without coordinates, every breath potentially the last, every moment a possible arrest as this projectile strikes in its path something that is not necessarily the target of its obscure trajectory. With trust, however, rider and horse are one, and thus complete. We cling to the animal’s neck, as far as it will carry us, and the neck (like the fin of a dolphin) has the stability of a statue already mounted on a plinth. A conspiratorial whisper completes the effect: *I’m with you no matter what.*

§ *Thick Skin*

Solely by *self-excoriation* do we discover in ourselves the seed of other personalities. These are found on our social surface, just beneath the *seal* of our social bonds.
§ *Circulus donationis*

You feel you may have been given too much praise? Then you have some humility left. But excessive thanks for excess praise—is that even possible? For some not: for them, thanks alone gives satisfaction, so there can be no such thing as excessive thanks in return for praise. For others, however, excess in gratitude is judged a possibility. But probably not in the way you imagine: not because they are so humble as to feel they don’t deserve so much thanks (which is for them a kind of praise). No, in quite another way.

Thanking for excessive praise unaccompanied by more or less equal praise in return—an exclusive focus on thanks, that is, no matter how genuine—could be taken as excessive. Because praise often carries a hope and even (less attractively) an expectation of reciprocity in praise—as gratitude does of reciprocated gratitude. Such praiseless thanks would disappoint—they would be in excess because inadequate, unbalanced, lopsided. Certainly this does not hold for all forms of giving. But it seems to hold for giving praise, on the grounds that it does not cost much, and that almost always—provided “neighbourly” relations—it can be given back, and enriches even the poor. It need not even be a wealth of praise, which can be scaled to its recipient’s humility. The only trouble is finding enough to really mean it. Praise not meant is a verbal gift silently taken back.
§ Take It Back

A Polish Catholic familiar with Job’s “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away” also knows that “Who gives and takes back will knock around in Hell.” This last has its English equivalent in a proverb popular in Shakespeare’s day: “Give a thing, and take a thing, to wear the Devil’s gold ring.” It shows the same association between taking back gifts and the Devil (before he was relieved by another redskin in the phrase “Indian giver”).

By accepting both maxims as true, the Catholic of Polish extraction avows the validity of two sets of laws, of two codes for giving and un-giving, with starkly unlike consequences. Has he then, in managing to hold them together, squared the circle of his faith? And could this mean that in the long run his God too is bound for Hell?
Some say our vision of Hell evokes none of the vivid torment it once did—that it has become abstract, if still fanciful. Indeed, we look up at Rodin’s bronze door with admiration and aesthetic detachment; we have eyes for its imposing size, its sculptural groups and details, its fidelity to Dante’s Inferno, and forgive the masterpiece its failure to evoke what we no longer carry in us.

But one fine morning we pass within earshot of a vibrating plate compactor as it is dragged by a worker across a stretch of pavement—its effect so singularly penetrating, though neither especially harsh nor at all loud, that suddenly, with a shudder, the scales fall from our apostate eyes, and we are back before the Gates, this time grating heavily and forlornly to reveal Dantesque scenes beyond. A glimpse is all we get as the gates slam shut.

Our eschatological vision has grown passive and dull, and sometimes we feel we have seen all there is of Hell on earth, but all it takes is a new sound that shakes us to the very core to unlock a secret gateway to the old inferno.
Why I Made Fun of Holy Water

Young people, improperly brought up, used to be drawn (and perhaps still are in many places) to a form of sacrilege whose chief aim, I have it on good authority, was to show off the courage of wit—not courage itself, the kind of serious virtue needed in the field, nor wit itself either, the kind that makes some the hubs of social circles, but a half-courage of half-wit—the best they can do at that stage of life. While this juvenile humour might strike us as daft and in the end predictable, we cannot but think fondly of the days when we ourselves could still thumb our nose at authority. Back then, we were our own gods, thought ourselves quasi-divine, and the thought of submitting to something so all-encompassing, all-commanding, mysterious, and archaic as one god for all and for all time made us uncomfortable. The weapons most accessible to us then were not arguments from the pens of philosophes or romantic poets, but practical jokes and pranks. We saw nothing wrong with this; our own personal gods, after all, constantly mocked one another.

God Question

If God couldn’t make up his mind whether or not to exist, we would make it up for him.
Comparing “Apples”

Recently my discussions of matters theological have taken on a new flavour. My Brazilian friend said to me: “As I was preparing a cupuaçu mousse for our dessert, I reflected upon the biblical account of Genesis as a typically European cosmological narrative. It is obvious that after creating Eve, God devoted himself to the task of creating cupuaçu, the real sinful fruit, to do her in. Apples can only be considered a sinful fruit in a fruit-impoverished land. The European version lacks imagination.”

I replied: “You’re right, ‘apple’ was a later misconstrual, likely as not based on the Latin of the Vulgate. The original was some divine fruit without any seeds, sui generis. But in any taste competition for the conduit of forbidden knowledge, cupuaçu would be the clear winner. Someone should correct this.”

Although apples do look tastier (and I assume they did back then)… And wasn’t the seduction complete before the first bite? The incentive after all was not fruit juice, but mental juice.

It is always like that: we are seduced by the appearance of something, not only to admire it but also to think it desirable. That is how we are first led to reach for it. If the forbidden fruit looked like cupuaçu—was cupuaçu—we might never have sinned. We would have missed something exquisite, but what a small price to pay, considering…

The question remains: who is responsible for the seduction? God, by making the fruit of knowledge attractive? Or Satan by giving lacklustre produce a high gloss? I’d like to think God planted something ugly, like cupuaçu; why would He tempt us? And that, once we had sinned, He would (deus deceptor! dieu trompeur!) want the flavour to deceive rather than outright disappoint us. This speaks against apples.
§ Default Inheritance

As below the rock freshly pried from soil, so beneath the death mask of the last man worms will be hard at work. Could we stoop to hate the worm for one day inheriting the earth from us? Not if we also cheered it on to outlast us.

§ Disputed Inheritance

The worm belongs to the earth alive. We, only dead.

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