The Cunning of Folly

Cleverness is a luxury and a sign of comfort. Enjoy it while you can, especially when it is earned. While you are at it, let others enjoy it with you. But never mistake it for wisdom, which comes from hardship only. When hardship comes, make the most of it. But do not seek out hardship to get at wisdom. Nowhere is it written that all men can be wise. You will be found out as a fool for second-guessing fate.

Running with It

Those of us intent on maintaining youthful momentum attain their final destination out of breath. That is very bad form. You may start out running, but never arrive running. Since you started on foot, however, do not allow yourself to finish any other way!
§ Hikers and Runners

There is pleasure in hiking alone along a path of my choosing—instead of running a marathon, which simply continues after I drop dead.

§ Crooked Timber

In a race against time, I saddled myself with a project. An old, warped piece of oak, the varnish crazed, alligatored, water-stained. My self-imposed task was not refinishing this dead bit of wood, much less planing to make it straight; it was determining what it was once a part of, and how it came to be this way.

§ Facing Out

[M]an was made to live facing outward.

—Cioran*

You cannot write about faces, only read them. You cannot read faces, only look at them. Which statement is true? Or which is truer?

Try as you might to write about faces and you will not be able, in the end, to arrive at more than a handful of banal generalizations. You might as well be writing about marriage or dogs. Faces exposed, faces perceived and recognized, sincerity concentrated in faces—for isn’t it that we face others (or are

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* Cioran, Trouble with Being Born, 32.
unable to face them), or tell them to their face what we think of them? Faces as meeting places of most sensory apparatuses: eyes, tongues, noses, ears... Faces as a typically human trait; animals not graced with them but with other, cruder physiognomies... Dead, slackening faces, efforts to cover up deathly pallor and “set the features”... And then this: faces mask the unpredictability of a person. They are relatively constant in their features and even expression, giving the often false impression of the constancy of their bearers. Even faces in constant motion, so-called “expressive,” are read as pageantry, mere surface disturbance, betraying if anything a steady and simple soul. Faces are the “mirrors” of the soul, as the eyes are its “windows”: black or tarnished mirrors, dirty or broken windows.

And my own face? I would like to read in it my own intentions, but rarely do I turn to it for help in divining them. What use, then, is my face to me? My attentions suggest it is of much use: it communicates, it’s something to address when making self-demands or -pleas. My face is what others see; shall I make it presentable? When in another’s face, does it change like some bunraku demon-puppet I never myself manage to see?

And should it become intimate with another, even then my face remains closest and most familiar to me (as much as a face can ever be close and familiar). It is my “selfie,” it expresses “me.” The faces of others appear to express them—their pleasure or displeasure, puzzlement or ease—but how often does the inner mood really come through? As we age, we learn not only dissemblance (“control”) but suspicion too. The only mugs we trust, clouding over and brightening to the soul’s weather without fail, are those of children. Before learning facial control, they like to hide themselves, and then their faces, which for a long time thereafter serve as the handiest stuff of hilarity and a sandbox for stylizing identity. This transparency of children is a source of wonder, any new parent will tell you.

Then comes the public regulation of expression: when it is proper to cry or to smile, and what it means, and what it does. In the facial code of conduct we have a powerful social
filter. Even in private, before a vanity, others are looking over our shoulder, watching us.

For every “defaced” person—losing composure, losing face—there are as many “depersonized” faces—seemingly ownerless, suspended in the air like waxen masks. It is such faces that best conceal human mystery (of which the unmasked, faceless person is the most disappointing revelation). The depersonized ones do not blend in anywhere, sticking out for no other reason. Meanwhile, the rare facial chameleon goes about unnoticed (as does their remarkable talent).

The sea of faces marking the square, the street, the web: all teeth, all mouth, all eyes—what they say is: we are here to be seen but have no hope of being recognized. Even to notice any one of them, one is forced to focus, to choose, to suppress all the rest.

To get away from those faces, to get away from the face . . . We spend so much of time facing others we can efface none save our own. These other faces are strange because changeable—and nowhere as strange as when flipped upside down. Our own face is strange as well in photographic reverse. The first face we saw must have seemed especially strange, and could be never became familiar. Perhaps this explains the perpetual strangeness of the face-to-face for me.

As we attend to our own face in self-portraits, and like what we see, we judge ourselves good and think ourselves happy. And if we see only facial flaws, then not as character flaws; we can dislike our own faces without judging ourselves, their wearers.
§ Portraits

A likeness is to otherness as a guest is to a stranger—a temporary erasure of unfamiliarity. Unless that likeness is of ourselves, or of one we know well, and the guest is someone close to us. Then the sight of the representation, as well as the formality of hosting, has the opposite effect—a temporary erasure of familiarity.

§ Browbeaten

Thought makes an unlikely protagonist, but our protagonist is precisely thought. And why should it not be? Was it not thought that conceived of this story and made itself the principal? Indeed, the story was devised as a reply to “Dead and Going to Die,” an essay by Michael Sacasas, reflecting on a series of portraits taken of young Lewis Thornton Powell aboard the USS Saugus by Alexander Gardner in 1865, where Powell was awaiting trial by military tribunal for his part in the Lincoln assassination conspiracy, for which he would be hanged a couple of months later:

According to Powell’s biographer, Betty [J.] Ownsbey, Powell resisted having his picture taken by vigorously shaking his head when Gardner prepared to take a photograph. Given the exposure time, this would have blurred his face beyond recognition. Annoyed by Powell’s antics, H.H. Wells, the officer in charge of the photo shoot, struck Powell’s arm with the side of his sword. . . . Powell then seems to have resigned himself to being photographed, and Gardner proceeded to take several shots of Powell. Gardner must have realized that he had something unique in these exposures because he went on to copyright six images of Powell. He didn’t bother to do so with any of the other pictures he took of the conspirators. Historian James Swanson explains: “[Gardner’s] images of
the other conspirators are routine portraits bound by the conventions of 19th century photography. In his images of Powell, however, Gardner achieved something more. In one startling and powerful view, Powell leans back against a gun turret, relaxes his body, and gazes languidly at the viewer. There is a directness and modernity in Gardner’s Powell suite unseen in the other photographs.” My intuition was re-affirmed, but the question remained: What accounted for the modernity of these photographs?

... Powell could not avoid the gaze of the camera, but he could practice a studied indifference to it. In order to resist the gaze, he would carry on as if there were no gaze. To ward off the objectifying power of the camera, he had to play himself before the camera. Simply being himself was out of the question; the observer effect created by the camera’s presence so heightened one’s self-consciousness that it was no longer possible to simply be. Simply being assumed self-forgetfulness. The camera does not allow us to forget ourselves. In fact, as with all technologies of self-documentation, it heightens self-consciousness. In order to appear indifferent to the camera, Powell had to perform the part of Lewis Powell as Lewis Powell would appear were there no camera present. In doing so, Powell stumbled upon the negotiated settlement with the gaze of the camera that eluded his contemporaries. He was a pioneer of subjectivity.

Before the camera, many of his contemporaries either stared blankly, giving the impression of total vacuity, or else they played a role—the role of the brave soldier, or the statesman, or the lover, etc... Playing a role entails a deliberate putting on of certain affectations; playing yourself suggests that there is nothing to the self but affectations. The anchor of identity in self-forgetfulness is lifted and the self is set adrift. Perhaps the violence that Powell had witnessed and perpetrated prepared him for this work against his psyche.

If indeed this was Powell’s mode of resistance, it was Pyrrhic: Ultimately it entailed an even more profound surrender of subjectivity. It internalized the objectification of the self
that the external presence of the camera elicited. This is what gave Powell’s photographs their eerie modernity. They were haunted by the future, not the past. It wasn’t Powell’s imminent death that made them uncanny; it was the glimpse of our own fractured subjectivity. Powell’s struggle before the camera, then, becomes a parable of humanness in the age of pervasive documentation. We have learned to play ourselves with ease, and not only before the camera. The camera is now irrelevant."

Enjoying my role of spectator to the drama of Mr. Sacasas’s curiosity, a piece filled with insightful speculations at every turn building boldly to the above climax, I arrived dazzled before his much anticipated final revelation—but just then a most charming urchin, whom I had mechanically waved aside, grabbed me by the sleeve and pulled me away. The interruption was certainly no coup de théâtre, seeming unscripted, without foreshadowing—and being very likely my own production, for the moment set off-stage, mounted somewhere in the wings. For its part, Sacasas’ grand finale stuck around only as long as one approached it without intermission, and had already begun to withdraw from the imaginary, docile reader it had expected, eager to follow it anywhere for the bliss of a mystery explained quickly. The persuasiveness of Sacasas’s conclusion depended on this; any undue, scrutinous delay would trip it up. Even had I extricated myself from the iron grip of the snotty youngster (in whom I now recognized my own incredulity), I would still have not caught up with Sacasas; my brief hesitation left me to my own interpretive devices.

Sacasas contends that it is Powell’s playing himself — and not a role, a stereotype, for which the photo op typically called — that renders the 1865 suite of photographs so uncannily modern. At this my urchin stomped his feet and shook his head: “Poppycock! It’s the hint of tension in his face,

never mind its cause, that makes for these images’ modernity. His frown and nothing more. The simple, homespun sweater doesn’t hurt, it’s pretty timeless. The clean exposure of his young neck sure brings the ‘victim’ close to you, who fancy yourselves his ‘victims’ too. Admit it makes you wanna neck him! So your arousal makes him modern? Now that’s a good one!” Uncouth though he was, there may have been something to his talk. He looked crestfallen when I let him know I didn’t buy it.

My lad has since cleaned up his act and learned to stand his ground: “Powell strikes us as ‘modern’ not for having ‘surrendered his subjectivity’ or ‘pioneered’ the modern ‘fractured subjectivity’ with which we readily identify today. Sacasas has it exactly backwards. Powell makes a point of looking inwards, steely-eyed, of retreating into himself. He is ostentatiously indifferent to his shabby good looks. Outwardness, affectation — that is the fate of the couple in the photograph Sacasas includes by way of contrast. The man and woman, stiff-backed, seated, play the roles assumed by them in society. Concerned with appearing decent, conforming to custom, they are not anchored in any selves I can make out.

“Powell, meanwhile, refuses to submit, to strike the convict’s pose, to play the role the camera seems to expect and want to elicit. Instead, he becomes intent on individuality. In the wake of his crime, the radical acts for which he will soon pay dearly, he concentrates himself, drops anchor in his brief and unembarrassed life to get clear on what he stands for, what he really is, freely and through-and-through, only to keep it all to himself. You want to document the would-be assassin? There he sits, resigned to being watched, aware of being the object of curiosity. Put on the defensive by the prying eye of the photographer, forced to play along, he eludes his objectification.

“Owing to the serial character of the exposures, we can see a striking range in Powell’s posture, relaxed despite the obvious constraints of his manacles and the session itself. A moving suite; the motivation in his breast is almost palpable. Each of the shots seems to have captured a fleeting instant, compared to the longer durations registered on most
other legible images from the period. Powell’s tense facial expression (his furrowed brow) contributes most to this impression. Up to that point, a combination of technology and custom made ‘the moment’ as unavailable to practitioners as Cartier-Bresson’s moment décisif would later be for his contemporaries. The protocol in photo-portraiture was to dress up according to your station and hold a stock pose aided by furniture, props, and braces. All this to suspend your temporary cares, transcend the accidental, eliminate any momentary tension — resulting in a ‘natural,’ general you, rather than someone focused and caught up in the moment (whom you would later find silly or unrecognizable). Even the comparatively spontaneous tableaux vivants seemed dead — as late as 1882, the trio Nietzsche, Lou Salome and Paul Rée would still appear wooden, weighed down by the photographic studio system.

“It took a ‘location’ and an uncooperative subject-object like Powell, with an expression instantly recognized as ephemeral, to break this convention of photo-portraiture and showcase the modernity of the medium: its capacity to capture the moment. The added attraction of each photograph, reinforced by its place in a tight sequence, was its seizure of an instant of an individual defying its grasp. We still fancy ourselves such individuals, attached to having clear identities that cannot be summarily extracted from us.”

Who had it right, the better angel of my incredulity or Sacsas, whom I had previously given the benefit of a doubt? The stakes were high enough: Subjectivity and Agency in Modernity. Gainsaying a view well-expressed, my urchin made a case for Powell as a self-conscious displayer of the powers and limits of technology — photography being a means of drawing out Powell’s uniqueness without, however, the ability to fix it. This interplay between subjects and the cameras pointed at them gives rise to a desire to have ourselves caught on film more and more frequently, in ever diminishing intervals. Instead of simply reflecting our modern subjective fragmentation, photography in the first place brings out in us that Self that it at once is powerless to capture.
§ Life of Zilch

In the college of the future, every student should be required to write at least one biography of a deceased nobody.

§ Spilling Your Beans

Those in the public eye who can’t help themselves from spilling their own beans, tempted by public interest, are to be pitied. The public will decide how their life is told. Not only will they have to live with this tale, but their own interpretation of it will carry little if any weight—not merely because they have given away author’s rights, but because their judgment was put into question by what and how much they had divulged.

§ Making up Lives

All our work is autobiographical, not merely conditioned by our living. Autobiographical not just in the pedestrian sense that we make the work (and everything contained in it) part of our life, by the mere fact of engaging in it. My biographer might write, based on my work: he was interested in X because he had experienced something like, or something of, X. But equally: he wanted to make something of X, for its own sake, or to make X a part of himself. Such speculation is not always flattering to its object. There is a measure of relevance for each strand in our work, not all of which is material for a biography—for the simple reason that, except in the authorized cases, the metric of relevance is missing. A good biographer recognizes this and leaves uncombed what a bad one would style.
§ Literary Effects

Writers who have been through a lot as writers, who have to their name not only their books but also the scars and scrapes, regrets and disappointments left from their exposure to the public (which even in our civilized, squeamish, herbivorous age thirsts for blood), have generally little fear of their executors. “There isn’t a branch or a thorn, / That didn’t catch him going by, / Leaving his clothes tattered and torn,”* concludes the upbeat testament of literary vagabond Villon, who summons his executors to his deathbed.

This bruised condition, this difficult past, is an advantage over those who passed through professional life unscathed. A healthy relationship between executor and writer (whose neck remains, for a while at least, on the line) is built upon the latter’s trust and forgiveness, which come easier after years of public abuse. The executor acts only as the arm of literary law: his dead client’s estate must be protected from the public. Those who received more than a fair share of acclaim do not quite grasp this, thinking such executions especially cruel and unjust.

Working with Dreams

The dream resists being turned into narrative. It is made of different stuff, exceedingly fine and ethereal. This is obvious not only when you try to recall one, record it, but when you attempt to work with it. It is very hard to work with a dream—unless you take it as it was, rough and wild, without reworking it. It is not the dream that must adjust itself to your story, but the story to your dream, if its dreaminess is to be left intact. It is with dreams as with fragments of meteors fallen to Earth. One thinks, quite wrongly, that just because they have landed they are up for grabs and can be fashioned at will. The Rolex Daytona Meteorite looks like an ordinary watch. Its space-rock face might have raised the price of cool, but will never raise us to the stars.
§ Fast Asleep

It is a rare author who can pull off taking narratives from dreams, a rare author who can draw on them for material without giving himself away. The reasons for this are as mysterious as they come. But let us venture three guesses.

In dreams we are not ourselves, not in control of imagination. Tied to their strange origin is the sense that they belong at once to no one and to everyone. Around the dream-story, the story based closely on a dream, hang the guilt and suspicion of stolen goods. Taking from dreams means dodging the labour we still associate with true, honest creation, and can be a source of shame. Copying them carries the faint stigma of plagiarism, and can cast doubt on one’s creative powers. To play it safe, to avoid cheating, dreams are often flagged, or otherwise identified.

Yet the more important reason why dreams do not make credible stories has to do with their content and structure—dead giveaways. Transferred to the page or on film they are obviously, surreally unserious, compromising even comedy. Only those who undergo psychoanalysis boast dreams serious and creative enough to be worth preserving artistically (they have earned ownership of their dreams, and even indirectly paid for it).

But we know better anyway: that dreams are a democratic republic where all can partake in the genius of invention; that virtually everyone, no matter how long they have left to sleep, spends a great deal of time there, has full rights as a citizen. Smugglers might not be prosecuted, but will be found out. Dreams resist being passed off as products of real inspiration; just look at how clumsy and ponderous they seem. Duty taxes, my dear, borders, customs—but, beyond that, be on your merry way!

It is, one suspects, only the false, asocial conviction that we experience more or less the same reality but live in incommensurate dreamlands that stands in the way of republican relations—and waking-life relations with dreams as dreams. Were the literary reticence systematically reversed, removing the reality pretense and stigmata of shame, we would see
how much more we share when we sleep. I do not mean the local colour, familiar faces, languages, and customs that, as in the waking world, remain specific to each, but the broad strokes of humanity that transcend them. How much in common we have when we are least social: the continuity of our powers, desires, and needs—none of which we need to censor, when we can blame them on the dreaming strangers in our lonely beds.

§ Dug Up

_He speaks underground. Only people who dig equally deep can hear him._

—Kraus on Lichtenberg*

The author of Roger Kimball’s 2002 review of Lichtenberg’s _Waste Books_ lives in the Age of Plagiarism. Translator R.J. Hollingdale’s introduction to the same is repeatedly invoked, but not as the template for the entire review, which it effectively became. To acknowledge this would have been to preempt the charge of plagiarism—something that Nietzsche, living in a different age, was not obliged to do when writing his _Genealogy of Morals_ (1887), so well summarized in Lichtenberg’s “Notebook G,” §21 (dated sometime between 1779 and 1783). It is regrettable that the review’s author did not better take into account that he lives in our day, rather than Nietzsche’s.

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* Kraus, _Dicta and Contradicta_, 90.
§ Law of Transformation

Two Mamelukes were undoubtedly more than a match for three Frenchmen; 100 Mamelukes were equal to 100 Frenchmen; 300 Frenchmen could generally beat 300 Mamelukes, and 1,000 Frenchmen invariably defeated 1,500 Mamelukes.

—Napoleon’s martial calculations

The dialectical law of transformation of quantity into quality is now applied to books. The more one writes of them, the more this affects their quality. Individually they will get worse, or stay the same at best. But marshalled, they’re a force to be reckoned with!

§ Quantity over Quality

Something is rotten in the State of Letters if the chief motive for continuing to write is to match one’s rival book for book.

§ Taking In, Letting Go

“The more the mind takes in the more it expands.” Until, at some point, it exceeds capacity, tips and pours itself into a book. Once relieved, it is known to fill again, capsize, and return upright. With each iteration, the mechanism improves.

What Are the Chances?

A Writing and publishing books is more and more like putting messages into bottles, don’t you think?

B Yes. Even when books become shorter, briefer, to have a greater chance of being read— even then...

A ... even then, with self-publishing taking off, there shall soon be islands of them, islands of drifting plastic bottles with soggy messages. They’ll have been released into a saturated sea, where they will only ever find... one another. No one will read them when they wash up!

Still, some messages in bottles, if they are found, do become proper books...

B How so?

A Why, by being read of course!

B Reading... Wasn’t that more common when there were fewer? But you have a point: when books have travelled far to reach us they have “a story to tell.” We might fish them out of the water for no other reason than that. These success stories (even if they don’t tell stories of success) give our desperate, lonely writers reason for hope. And why shouldn’t fortune smile on them as well?

A Should we encourage this hope?

B Hope should always be encouraged. It is futility we should be worried about!
Unbound…

…Unprinted, Unpromoted, Uncatalogued, Unsolicited, Unsold, Untitled, Unwritten, Un—

Out of Print

The backlist will see the light of day again when, like flesh in a meat grinder, it is fed through social media and comes out line by line. This will give it the requisite raw appearance.

“A Book”? 

More than the recent tomes on the history of the novel, publishers’ insistence on the subtitle “A NOVEL” suggests these are that genre’s waning days. But the “book” has ahead of it a bright future; its use as a label is still some time off.
§ Moratorium III

B A moratorium on new books? And you hope this will dam the flow of writing? When it is lifted, more will gush out again.

Why not learn to swim in it now? We need books to buoy and guide us before we can hope to navigate the streams, or swim upstream, or find our way out of the mainstream.

A Are you kidding me? The current is too strong to resist, to be anything but swept away by it.

And do we really need so much text? I don’t deny that people want to write, but do they need to? Is that where their energy ought to be directed? Isn’t there something better, more useful they could do? Most of the stuff isn’t even any good.

Why not turn grey literature black or white: bad enough not to be published, or good enough to be? The river into which you want to step to swim is white …

B … If you swim with that pure current, as fast as it, you will always be the same. But if you only dip into it, it will seem different each time, refreshing and inspiring. That’s why we need books. Books are like houses and hamlets along this grey river. They are places to spend the night.

A Bah, who can keep up with that river? It keeps passing us on every side, and we cannot resist it, we can only be carried by it—you call this swimming!? The book, as long as it exists, will only interfere with our brief and dripping existence. We grab hold of a book and right away we start to sink. We are sure to drown. We need fewer books — fewer riverine colonies — and more houseboats, floating text to live in. Then we will all feel at home in the river, instead of clinging to those dry and cultivated bits of land. But if we fill our pockets with stones, we will soon be found floating belly up, refuse amid the traffic, until some lonely old chap, who spends his last
days watching the river flow by, his eyesight failing, spots us, and, moved to pity, sees to our proper burial far from home.

B What an image. You have convinced me of a tension, and that it is a difficult choice between reading books and immersing yourself in the life of the river. Why not give up books? You don’t seem to share my view that we need them to find our way.

A You’re right. I don’t share it. As long as there are books, I will not give them up—but the future of judgment depends on us doing so. I am certain of it! We must wean ourselves off books! Slowly but surely. Nothing good ever came of preserving authors in paper mausoleums. We must chop them up and distribute them, like the relics of saints. We must link them without imprisoning them. And those who take forever to make an argument, and can’t stand being “chopped up”? Do we need them now?

B I suppose not. But we can’t develop our judgment reading only fragments—even fragments of former books—however clever or wise! We still need arguments! And they take at least as much attention and patience to take in as they did to make. When thoughts flow well, uninterrupted and sustained, they lend the river you speak of coherence.

A More often than not they get in the way: they exclude other voices and hoard attention. We need to resist imposing the structures of books on this grey matter! We don’t need to learn from books how to stay afloat in this great river; for many that comes naturally. A book only pulls us down to the slimy bottom. They say young people take to it is like fish to water. They have learned to swim. It irks me when I see these capable swimmers judged by the old standards and submit to them. Rest assured, we will be judged in our turn.

B We already are—by you!
I’m not one to judge—I’m complicit. But I know it’s not even on swimming that the new judgment depends; it is on flowing so fast that the river itself seems to slow. That’s what judgment depended on in the golden age of books: it survived by keeping ahead of them, more multiple, manifold, and fluid than they were. There were fewer books, and even when published speedily their distribution mercifully lagged. Then things changed, and thinking grew frustrated with constantly falling behind reading, and reading became inattentive, driven by catching up, and no one, not even those who read for a living, could really keep abreast of new releases. This is all the more true today, I’m afraid. Except that books now are not, as previously, distillations of reflection, but spaces where we do our thinking—on the page. Yet they have fallen again out of sync with the pace of change and take too long to publish. And when they are finally out they announce their presence with come-hither titles to get noticed; meanwhile, people have moved on; how much are they really going to engage with what is no longer current? And these books responding to a moment (already passed), how much of their argument is the fruit of long gestation? Very little; one book rushes another, impatiently awaiting completion. Books come too late yet demand instant attention, and fall over themselves to peddle their musty thoughts, even ones aired to the public a thousand times before. That way they devalue everything that is not a book. They often start out bookish, trying to live up to the book’s cultural standing, and for that very reason are never quite credible in the flow. We need fewer riverside distractions, fewer fixations, fewer fixed abodes!

I see what you mean: you’d like the pioneers not to look back, to make up their minds, to go with the flow…

The book (would that it was just one!) holds everyone back. It’s time to get over it, time to turn the page.
§ Before You Put Pen to Paper

Which would you rather be: the paper weighed down by words unworthy of it, or the paperweight keeping them in place?

§ Lapidary

A lapidary expression is at once beautiful and poignant. Its effect does not stop at this first impression. It is in the nature of the lapidary’s art, which the aphorist admires, that it takes in and works materials more diverse, less precious and thus more useful than the diamond, the sole specialty of a diamond-cutter. Thought, like art, cannot advance in monomania. The destiny of the diamond is to be stolen and handled in gloves. The destiny of the stone is to be used and worn.

§ An Aphorism

An aphorism means to be unwrapped as a gift, not admired in a jeweler’s case. To read one is to subject it to a test of reasoning, imagination, and judgment—to work your way through the layers of tissue nestling it as through the steps of its mounting, polishing, and cleaving, to the rough shape in which it was first found. Studying the work of the maxim cutter, you apprentice in the art of criticism.
“Uncombed Thoughts”

*Uncombed Thoughts*

*Under the comb the tangle and the straight path are the same.*

—Heraclitus

It would indeed be strange if aphorisms, so often dispensing their insights through analogy, did not also invite analogies when it came to themselves. It could be that the aphorism’s affinity for rough self-comparisons is its compromise with anti-intellectualism. In drawing comparisons between themselves and products of skilled manual work or other concrete, recognizable things—“stock cubes,” “saltpits,” “nuts,” “bullets,” “asses,” “hand grenades,” “someone else’s lost earnings,” “pet monkeys,” “bananas,” “short cuts,” “wandering Gypsies,” “parachutes,” “ripe fruit,” “shacks,” “gongs,” “hedgehogs,” “origami,” “splinters,” “dribble,” “raisins,” “summits,” “sweepings” and “vaccines”—they puff themselves up to greater general utility than they can in fact claim. At least on first impression, before their real transmutation unfolds before us like a fragrant rose at dusk—all nature, no fabrication—we do not mind these unwashed half-thoughts. They speak to us, after all; *ergo*, we ourselves could have spoken them!

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§ Held to Account

Aphorisms are rogue ideas. Aphorism is aristocratic thinking: this is all the aristocrat is willing to tell you; he thinks you should get it fast, without spelling out all the details. . . . An aphorism is not an argument; it is too well-bred for that. To write aphorisms is to assume a mask—a mask of scorn, of superiority. Which, in one great tradition, conceals (shapes) the aphorist’s secret pursuit of spiritual salvation. The paradoxes of salvation. We know at the end, when the aphorist’s amoral, light point-of-view self-destructs.

—Susan Sontag*

It is easy to see the point about aphorisms not needing proof. I suppose what made this feature, or aspiration, of aphorisms crystal clear to me was Fritz Raddatz’s “final farewell” to Emil Cioran: only later, through the reading of Cioran’s early semi-aphorisms, whose metamorphosis into maxims was incomplete, did Raddatz realize that the later aphorisms he once enjoyed and excused, by chalkling up their apodiction to provocation, irony, or wit, were in fact deeply problematic and criticizable.

For my part, I cannot help subjecting aphorisms to the test of reasoning. If I take them prima facie, they are sitting ducks. Unless, of course, they wear their jokiness on their sleeve (“Thank God for Satan”†). It is rare that one “speaks” to me, its truth cutting through my skepticism. More often, I am drawn in only to deduce their occasion and formation, as I am curious to trace a trickle of water to its source, or at the very least its outlet. And once I have gotten that far—broken down the process, gone back to the bedrock—I proceed to argue with process and bedrock. I take issue with effaced judgments—with everything, as a matter of fact, that had gone into this brilliant truth but was sanded off along the

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way. I reject the aphorist’s having it both ways: aesthetically and propositionally; when I look at one side I am blind to the other — my preference being, again, for some quantum of verity, acting as breakwater to the sublimity and beauty of the composition.

To illustrate: “A high level and depth are very different things” (275). What is here to argue with? Was the author aiming to communicate a banal truth, a counter to Heraclitus perhaps? We judge this unlikely, even if we hold on to a possible allusion. Between the lines, here individual words, we pick up on what was likely meant: different senses of cultural attainment. And as soon as we pry, they become questionable.

“Could I not just say everything simply? I could, but no one would pay for it” (363). Now this is more like it — were it not for the fact that it no longer rings true.

Or: “The great receive instruction, the little people are taught a lesson” (42). How can you argue with that? You perhaps cannot. But to us the aphorism is a sign of decadence, and its authors, as Sontag says, deep down defenders of privilege. And so we think it insufficient to marvel at it. We would go so far as to assume there is not enough in it to marvel at: looked over once or twice, it loses its lustre and appears laboured, or else ornamental and tawdry. With the loupe as our default approach, a strong feeling can only be one of pleasant surprise. If we find a gem, we stuff it in our pocket. It “belongs” to us now, and thus to everyone.
§ Juggling

How can aphorisms change your life? Find out when James Geary brings his Juggling Aphorisms show... a mix of memoir, literary history, audience participation — and live juggling, with words and balls. Audience members are invited to randomly pick an aphorism from a globe and read it aloud; Geary then tells about that aphorism and the person who wrote it, weaving in personal and historical anecdote. There are also several blank strips of paper in the globe. If an audience member draws one of these, they can name any theme and Geary must cite a related aphorism on the spot. If he fails, they get a free copy of the book!

—unccredited

Q. Which book?


Q. Does Mr. Geary never compose aphorisms at the audience’s bidding?

A. Of course not. His is a memory unusually well stocked with the thoughts of others.

Q. He does say “cite,” though, not “recite.”

A. Well spotted! The description is tricky—like juggling... I suspect what he performs is closer to reading.

Q. And the juggling? Surely much skill is needed to keep in the air the different “balls”?

A. I have seen the show and can vouch for its clumsiness: the delivery of bios, the citation of dicta, the crude cross-cultural cross-historical comparisons (Chamfort was Warhol, he even says). And picking “worlds” (a proprietary metaphor for aphorisms) out of a globe—you can’t imagine what fun that was! Geriatric entertainment in its purest form!

I aim to insult only those persons of any age who cannot keep a thought straight in their head because all their lives (however long or short) they would rather see it done for them, for their amusement. And the whole thing about how “Aphorisms Can Change Your Life”—let’s call it artisanal baloney. As “Chamfort” might say, “Art is what you can get away with.”* And in Geary-land you can get away with a lot.

‡ More Is Less?

Everything very good has always been brief and scarce; abundance is discreditable. Even among people, giants are usually the true dwarves. Some value books for their sheer size, as if they were written to exercise our arms not our wits.

—Baltasar Gracián†

The writer can take this wisdom to heart by giving himself little space (even less than he has!). Every great aphorist is distinguished by the persuasiveness of his exaggerations. Brevity has the obvious advantage of excusing lapses of

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* Actually, this is likely Andy Warhol (or pseudo-Warhol).
† Gracián, Pocket Oracle, p. 12, sec. 27.
judgment, to which he seems especially prone. He may write something one-sided and obtuse and call it deliberate provocation, or claim public service credit for exposing a noxious cliché to ridicule. Or he may shrug and distance himself from his ideas: “If you don’t like these, I’ve plenty of others.” And he can always fall back on his craft, since hyperbole, though hit-and-miss in its power to persuade, has the advantage of being more striking.

This might help explain why aphorists are fond of puns and reversals of memorable exaggerations. In another’s one-sided view they see their opportunity for subversion, sometimes even broad appeal. Bakunin is not remembered as an aphorist, yet his atheistic reversal of Voltaire was just such a predatory act. Things stood no differently with God’s oft-quoted reversal of Nietzsche, a boost to His waning popularity. The same simple operation could be detected in many great aphorisms, their authors having merely taken a contrary side. The facility with which reversals are handled, attached to the pleasure of playing with form, puts us in mind of the genesis of insight: the relish, namely, of contradiction.

Now for our inversion of Gracián above:

Every good thing has always taken time and was naturally plentiful; abundance is estimable. Even among people, dwarves are the real dwarves (sorry!) and giants, ever giants. Some value books for their epitaphic concision, as if to spare them every fatigue.

§ Chain Reaction

As the authors of *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking* make clear, aphorisms, those “fires without flames,” burn so brightly on account of their fancy for analogies. The briefer they are, the better their fuel is
ventilated, the more inspired the thoughts they in turn set alight.

Culture Vultures

“Aphorizing is a harmless art. There are others we should be more concerned about.”

Culture Vultures

“The popular novel is not a dead art. There are others more deserving of our attention.”

Hypocritics

Shoddiness, vested interests, and unembarrassed amateur-ism have trumped pretenses to knowledge, artistic sensibility, and judgment of taste. Move over, hypocrites! Make room for hypocritics!
§ A Common Cause

*Time seemeth to be of the nature of a river or stream, which carrieth down to us that which is light and blown up, and sinketh and drowneth that which is weighty and solid.*

—Bacon

As the profession of book criticism wanes, popular critics will mime the *pollice verso* of the gladiatorial arena. They may not want such power, but the public will expect it: book choice made simple and risk-free. In such a climate, where authors vie shamelessly for attention from those still in the reviewing business who, as pay for their work shrinks, have no more reason to curb their own literary ambition and are compelled to practice criticism chiefly out of self-interest—at such a time, reviews of threateningly good work will be grudging at best, at worst suffused with resentment.

The clearest indicator of the shift to negative-spectrum criticism will be inconsistency in individual opinion. While the dedicated, undistracted critic builds a reputation for reliability in judgment, the critic of the future, working and writing in a strangled environment, practices on the side, at variance with their writerly self—which they put first. When one peers into this imminent future, the corrosive effects of the critical spleen on the striving writer within seem obvious; a dark sketch on one side of already thin paper will show through on the other. The joy of writing requires that they make common cause.

That is why I would not dream of being a critic today. In my commitment to writing, I am convinced I serve the common cause of writers and critics. It is bad enough that as a writer I believe in the superiority of contemporary judgment, which never fails to recognize merit in the new. Only with repeated disappointment (“The book receives few reviews

and is ignored by the public. Bitterness”) could I hope to see my bias corrected. Things would be far worse if it were critics themselves who believed in infallibility, over against their predecessors’ errors of judgment. I would then be forced to break with them immediately.

The Democratic Challenge

Due to its institutionalization and technological restrictions, public criticism has long lagged behind literacy and informed opinion. Now perhaps we are witnessing the first real explosion of critical democracy and the competition of opinions on the only available model—that of the free market. There are still gatekeepers, value-porters, opinion-makers, and there will be as long as there exists social stratification and distinctions of taste. But basic quality control will be mechanized. Properly marketed, every item of opinion, however shoddy or déclassé, will find its consumer. The products of the elite will meanwhile be pushed or drowned out by large opinion outlets and pop-ups, with individuals providing meretricious content, and by boutique venues, creatures of successful reinvention usually due to lucky timing. Those who produce for refined taste—undervalued luxury goods—will see their niche shrink. They will know well to gauge demand and goodwill in advance, through subscription.

The more drunken and savage popular criticism waxes—as it is bound to do in digitized democracies committed not just to facilitating open access to information but also to universalizing critical expression—the more thin-skinned those who think in popular ways become, breaking down at the first sign of rejection—“bullied,” “harassed,” “belittled,” “insulted,” and “betrayed.” (And can we be certain of our ability to identify and prosecute critical bullying and mobbing?) By contrast, those few patronized by the unpopularly privileged will be assured of their love and see no need of ever venturing into wilderness.
§ Free Ride

The piggyback has gone the way of all offbeat assistance. There are no more pigs with portly backs to take you up. There are only pigs who never leave the clover.

§ Not to Be Outdone

Come April, the mad (whom the cold subdued) also spring to life, marching their follies up and down the muddy street. Look at us, madness’s blossoms!

§ Invisible Tree

Dreaming, like living, has its seasons. In your orchard as in mine, the tree of dreams is always the least cultivated. So in the autumn of our lives, we are content with sweeping up its fallen leaves, where before we would have sunk our teeth into its fruit, and before that marvelled at its blossoms—we, who are its roots!

§ Late Spring, Late Summer

There are moods proper to spring that ripen only in autumn, and summer experience crystallizing only in wintertime.
§ No Qualms

With the crude kind of D.I.Y. lighting I am peddling to the benighted, I am no heir to Prometheus. I am more like a coal-seller in a hard winter, when buyers are neediest and price hikes are laid at the feet of scarcity. If you find this objectionable, see if I care.

Of course I do, but what to do when one knows the winter will be the longest on record?

§ Got a Light?

How long has it been since someone asked you for a light? How would they know whom to ask these days, or that whom they should ask is you? Make yourself their go-to person. Take up position in a throughway and offer light. Offer it and watch someone walk up to you. They are not looking for conversation, they’ve heard enough about smoking too much, and they are not interested in you. What they do with your light is their business (and none of yours). They’ll find a need for it.

Why are so many of these “matches” about writing? Ideas, my friend, don’t grow on trees. They don’t drop from the sky. They are not the product of heavy industry. They are neither animal nor mineral. They are not the substance of sports. They are not returns on investments. Their material is this stuff.
§ Obscurantism

*Those who compose from coloured light the single and essentially white light, they are the real obscurantists.*
—Goethe*

It is one thing to admire stained glass, appreciating the coloured light shining through it, and another to look directly at the sun, to the inescapable blackening of everything else. Stained glass is good for seeing, white light, for blindness—insofar as shadows and colours are occlusions of such light. To blend all visible things is to see nothing at all. This is the genesis of God.

§ Misfired Insult

One plausible reason for why *matchhead* never caught on as a term of abuse (like *pinhead, blockhead, dummy, birdbrain, or clod*) is that, factoring in the proportions, it might easily be taken as flattery, a step up from *hothead or firebrand*. Either that or because, after God, light does not lend itself to taking offence, only to *giving* it. Its weapon is fire. Matchsticks are the myrmidonian armies of light.

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The Cynic’s Matchbox (That’s the Spirit!)

I throw in my lot with light—with matches, to be precise. They are at all times capable of making brighter: by day they distract from nimbus skies, by night they disperse the gloom of distance—and are never blinding!

By matchlight, I am liable even to write poetry of affirmation. No one can then accuse me of anything but affirmation—of course, purely on aesthetic grounds!

Light is in.
Dark is out.
Light is hip,
light is cool.
Dark is dour,
dark is cruel.

THE MATCHSTICK (to me).

Don’t take yourself so seriously. After all, you’ll be the only one. And you’ll still be accused of negation. Your affirmations will be jeered at: they are unproductive!

Illuminosity

I can’t decide: am I luminocentric, or more in love with the thick, bituminous darkness that straightaway follows light? Do I fall into the arms of day, or trace the all-black silhouettes of the contre-jour?
§ Light Touch

In darkness you shall call *Let there be light!* And so you will confess.

§ Seeing Darkness

Paradoxes have the unfortunate consequence of turning those who embody them into fools. For example, the first man who lit a match to see darkness. Did anyone except some village idiot ever in earnest try such a thing? But consider the act and you might soon hear yourselves exclaiming: “But of course! It is by stark contrasts that we approximate absolutes.” Although darkness is done for the duration of light, immediately afterwards does it not seem quite complete? And secondly, do we not see many things better in the light? Is this not true also of things quite black? If we see something dark in the darkness, a shape we can barely make out, would not illuminating at once bring it out?
§ Safety Matches

When playing with matches, we are told, safety comes first. To those who are childless and have not evolved the scolding and mollycoddling dispositions of parents towards their young, the phrase “safety matches” remains what it is, an oxymoron. The parents of Promethean mankind use it to curse its primal birthright to start fires, while dousing them. They engineer all the danger out of matches. To establish a semblance of order, they arrange them into books, where bundles would have sufficed. Only the matchbox still contains the threat of original disarray: with every agitation, the contents cast together inside the tray are shaken up and rearranged. What happens between them, in the dark, is their affair, possibly incendiary. A large black cat leaping across the box of one popular East European brand seems to attract as much as deter bad luck. A children’s toy manufactured from such a box held, instead of matches, two plastic mice. As one pushed the tray out this way and that, the white or the black one would come out to tempt the cat. Even this useless and stupefying diversion, already figurative playing with fire, has since been replaced by parental supervision.
§ Matches to Ashes

Perhaps the lesson of the Little Matchstick Girl extends beyond miserabilism and beatification of the poor. The warm light in the cold darkness is no longer the bleak reality of the child’s circumstances, her impending death from hypothermia, but a wondrously comforting illusion. One by one, you may recall, she strikes the matches that are her livelihood and warms herself by their evanescent flame. “The morning of the New Year dawned over the little body sitting with the matches, of which a bunch was almost burned up. She had wanted to warm herself, it was said. No one knew what lovely sight she had seen or in what radiance she had gone . . . ”* What she had seen was what she had imagined by match-light.

The fate of the little match-seller is of course one of the most familiar emblems of modern inequality, with the dirt poor inhabiting the fantasy of the filthy rich, but not the conscience. On the cosmic balance sheet, in line with archetypical folk-tale justice, inequality cuts both ways. It is as detrimental to the well-heeled as it is to the downtrodden. The impoverished imagination of the prosperous requires a sesame to access it; it is filled with gold and wondrous and exotic objects; nothing local and modest would satisfy it. The private visions of the poor are, meanwhile, not only spiritually richer, but can be found in the flame of a match.

§ Book Advertising

Matchbook covers carry advertisements for soft drinks, humour, hotels, recreation, resorts, resistance, nightclubs, cigarettes, cough medicine, cigars, ground transportation, liquor, cruises, casinos, beef, services, appliances, girls, magazines, anniversaries, supermarkets, talent contests, cities, banks, bingo, shoes, shirts, museums, motor oil, pesticide, luxury automobiles, and—most interestingly for us—books. It is a relief that book covers have not been degraded in the same way. Just imagine a book advertising a brand of matches, or a wood-burning fireplace. You would then be forgiven for mistaking certain self-promoting volumes for “essential kindling.”
Little A

The great Amazon, the “great green hell,” is still around. But it is no longer what the word Amazon first conjures. The name of a rainforest and the river running through it doubles as the name of the greatest book shipping company in existence. A jungle of paper and pulp spreads across the globe. Meanwhile, the other Amazon — “the last page of Genesis,” “still writing itself” — falls to the saws “unpublished.”

Nobody is drawing a causal link. The two Amazons are not in competition, and we have no confidence in the long-term survival of either of them. A “desert of trees that had to be cleared for the benefit of mankind” — the one no less than the other. A destiny indifferent to how we judge the human practices within each of them morally. Nomen omen est: the ancient Amazons entered history on the losing side.

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§ Long Distance

_The book is so low-tech, it’s hard for technology to degrade it._
—Evan Hughes

Precisely because the printed book is not in competition with what today bears the name of “technology,” it weathers prognoses of obsolescence and embarrasses media and gadgets that chomp at the bit to replace it. If it were to enter the short-distance running and innovate, it would expose itself to the risk of obsolescence, squandering the accumulated “capital” riding on its endurance. It still has the lead in the 600-year-race.

§ Legacy of Modernism

The notion that literature has value when it is accessible to the majority is one of the perverse legacies of—because a direct reaction to—Modernism. It is most troublesome to those who see no place for themselves in the literary mainstreams, who fundamentally decline late Modernism’s flaccid elitism, willfully minor and non-communicative, no less than the faux populism of the establishment. To write for one, at most several, readers, and leave it at that, is unintelligible within this polarized landscape, where letters cannot be used as literature’s carrier pigeons.

§ First Things First

Having something to say is, first of all, having someone to speak to.

§ Correspondence

Some are useful at a distance, others close at hand, and someone who is perhaps no good for conversation will be as a correspondent.

—Gracián*

The cheapening (and virtual disappearance) of sustained correspondence, its replacement by largely face-to-face interaction (increasingly in virtual form) no doubt owes something to the purely practical origins of letters—as a speedy conveyance of important information, to link and keep order in empires as much as households. While personal-letter specimens go back as far as the Sumerians, they are predated by administrative ones. Under the Romans, letter-writing became a privileged means of rhetorical, moral and spiritual cultivation—sometimes one-way or one-to-many (as in biblical epistles), and not always from afar, yet at enough of a distance that the written message could sink in without interference from casual discourse between the parties. In the modern era, it evolved into the main medium, alongside printed pamphlets and books, of a transnational Republic of Letters, where letters were widely circulated, addressed to the intellectual salon-elite, and a growing literate public.

The word correspondance acquired its meaning of private, two-way exchange right around then, in French (the linguistic heart of this imaginary res publica). Some of the older

* Gracián, Pocket Oracle, p. 59, sec. 158 (“Know How to Use Your Friends”).
notion of correspondence—a relation of conformity, analogy or resemblance between inanimate things, and mutual accord of sentiments and ideas—naturally transferred over to the concept of epistolary communication. What is less obvious is that, over time, by a kind of notional après coup, the sentiments expressed and bonds built through letter-writing came to colour the meaning of correspondance sans words, paper, or even human beings. For Baudelaire, such mutual relations between “perfumes, colours, and sounds”* form a secret theatre unobserved in the everyday tumult and rationalization so emblematic of modern life (as seen in his Paris Spleen). It is the heroic task of the artist to wander through forests where symbols “observe him with familiar eyes” (ibid.), and to attend to them, and even—as in later, surrealist chance encounters, “objects,” and their assemblages—to bring seemingly heteroclite things and thoughts to intimacy by the force of marvel and creative vision. Jünger was similarly partial to “the secret correspondence existing between things.”† Where he turns this interest into a method of composition, he resembles the eavesdropper; his words intercept harmonies invisible to another ear.

There is no reason why future letter-writers should not take a page from this “stereoscopic” disposition or Baudelaire’s roaming attention and create in their written correspondence a space where correspondences of this “nonhuman” kind can occur. An exemplar of such practice is John Berger’s exchange about colours with the artist John Christie, published as I Send You This Cadmium Red…. Recalling the occasion for beginning the correspondence, Christie writes:

† Jünger, Adventurous Heart, 73 (mod. trans.) (“The Picture Puzzle”).
stood. My eyes were caught by a bunch of carnations directly in front of me. Red and yellow carnations in a single vase, not formally arranged, just put there, a block of red and a block of yellow. The red were the nearest and I looked at them for part of the service trying to see how the heads were constructed, how the petals fitted over one another. But the shapes were too delicate and I was just slightly too far from them to see properly. As I thought I was understanding their shapes so the precision of the image slipped away like in a dream . . .

So for no better reason that the memory of those flowers I send you this Cadmium Red."

More than a mere reciprocated observation of correspondences among colours, the colour correspondence turns literal: image accompanies text virtually every time (a corresponding image, to be sure). The colours correspond, assisted by human curiosity about the chromatic scale, its cultural and personal values. On this basis — although by no means just this one — we would be forgiven for imagining a correspondence among humans in parallel to a correspondence among things, the one feeding into the other indefinitely, brought into correspondence in a language as yet unknown.

* John Christie, letter 1, in I Send You This Cadmium Red . . . : A Correspondence between John Berger and John Christie by John Berger and John Christie (Barcelona: Actar, 2000).
§ Writing For

And likewise it is the intention of my best friend for whom I write this, also, that I should write it only in the common tongue.

—Dante, “XXX: His Letter to the Rulers,”
The New Life

It is a strange linguistic effect that, as soon as a verb is followed by “for,” the action it designates is understood as useful in some way. The relation of utility holds even—and this is relatively new—between one’s action and oneself. Admittedly, the preposition in “thinking for myself” has a somewhat different sense than “doing something for myself,” but the latter connotation of usefulness is a good deal more prevalent.

Thus, we keep journals and heurmnals for ourselves, take time out and have quiet evenings at home with a cup of cocoa, all for ourselves, and all these uses of our time and attention also become ways of caring for or rewarding ourselves, and not forgetting—making “for” the fulcrum of the mantra of well-being.

With writing, and art more generally, for’s transitivity takes what not so long ago could be self-centred or almost exist in a vacuum—writing or art for its own sake, without regard to anything outside it, maximally devoid of purpose, écriture pure, channelling semiosis, epitomized in philosophical and aesthetic good posture—and transforms it into a duty, a public service and good rendered by private individuals. Blogging is now the paramount form of writing for others, in a way that tweeting is still not (if only because it is insubstantial and instantaneous, Twitter-happy). Bloggers, by contrast, feel an obligation towards their readers to be useful, helpful, instructive, illuminating, even when motivated by vanity. (Here it intersects with public art projects, whether commissioned or “free of charge.”)

* Dante, New Life, letter 30, p. 76.
There is no wishing away the public stigma attached to “writing for a living”—which essentially boils down to “writing for oneself”—now that one’s income from the written word almost always needs supplementing and the phrase thus conjures the privileged few who manage nonetheless to support themselves. In contrast to blogging or tweeting in one’s free time (freed up by adequate compensation for some other, useful work), “writing for a living,” especially when that writing is not obviously “for others,” does not justify let alone “pay for” itself in a way that, say, “dining out for life” (an AIDS fundraiser) does. The money made doing it ends up in the pocket of a single individual who, on the face of it anyway, spends all their productive time on one, self-directed (and, since not adequately remunerated, presumably quite useless) task.

Society is hard on writers, this is hardly news. But the conflicted relation between writing and for-ness will remain opaque without some understanding of the uneven development of “self-help” (in the broadest sense, from the care of the self to partaking of “life’s little pleasures” to urgent self-preservation). This development was severely hindered by the historically Christian notion of charity—the other-directed hand of the Good Samaritan. The concomitant lag in self-help’s acceptance into the sphere of public usefulness owes much to the grasping hand of Christianity in the shape of the modern capitalist state. This hand is quite visible when it catches us at our most passive as cultural consumers: as an advertisement enjoining us to “Be FOR something. FOR a life with more wow, and more now,” since “being against is the easy way, but being FOR something is an attitude that can change the world.”

§ Dead Letters

There always comes a time when a dear friend’s silence can no longer be taken *personally*. 
Envelope Stuffing

Letters morphed into emails, and for a long time emails had all the depth and complexity of letters. They were a beautiful new form that spliced together the intimacy of what you might write from the heart with the speed of telegraphs. Then emails deteriorated into something more like text messages (the first text message was sent in 1992, but phones capable of texting spread later in the 1990s). . . . I think of that lost world, the way we lived before these new networking technologies, as having two poles: solitude and communion. The new chatter puts us somewhere in between, assuaging fears of being alone without risking real connection. It is a shallow between two deep zones, a safe spot between the dangers of contact with ourselves, with others.

—Rebecca Solnit*  

While letters continue to be posted, they contain little more than envelope stuffing—and not just flyers, bills and bank statements. Has a similar degradation affected voice communication? There, the addition of cameras has made all the difference. Is it not true, in any case, that where there is competition and choice in personal communication technologies, one will always (even without corporate mechanisms) outdistance the others? The popularity of microblogging now was that of tweeting earlier today, was that of social networking and texting late last night, was that of video and text chat yesterday, was that of letters before the heyday of the telephone and the internet . . . We now see that we change services and usage before either reaches the point of obsolescence. It is not the technology that grows obsolete; it is our use that obsolesces. Under such conditions of testing out available means of connecting, perhaps attention to form is bound to outpace attention to content for a reason; perhaps in no other way is content itself eventually regenerated . . .

§ Diminishing Returns

It has been said that the “style and spirit” of letters is “always . . . the true ‘sign of the times.’” But what is the sign of times when letters ceased to be written, and all that is left of them is the signature? Should we be worried? Or rejoice that the sign of the times, whatever it may be, has moved on to more modern media that keep morphing rather than remain in the gauge of epistolary spirit and style. The signs of the times are these new media, their spirit and style.

There are revivalists who would like to bring back letter-writing. They believe it does the spirit good and improves writing style, if not the hand. But they are not blind to the fact that the returns on their own outlay are rapidly diminishing. Even their correspondents forget what a personal letter should look like. They respond in email missives, which offer freedom in minimal or informal style. The increase in volume is offset by reflective sloppiness, shortness, and poor editing. Preference goes to doing the job quickly, from the heart, ever on the fly. The personal diary, meanwhile, still rules in the department of longhand self-unlacing. Thus, letter-writing disappears as a means of one-on-one-exchange.

And, separately, it has become unfashionable to speak of “signs of the times,” since this implies that our times can change. Instead of letter-writing, the stock exchange is now the spirit of exchange, the digit, its style.

Dashed Off

It is sad to see one of the greatest technologies of the heart ever invented die in our lifetime—and seem even more short-lived than us. It is not that we have lost courage and drama in personal written exchange; audacity has never been easier. But the new brevity in correspondence has not been met with succinctness. While emails and text messages contain vestiges of personal letter-writing conventions, these have less to do with substance than with form. All highly ritualized behaviour that cannot adapt to a change in medium or context is similarly passed down form first. Yet, as the need for written communication at a distance dwindles, the form of the letter, still rigid and widespread, collapses after the initial exchange into sporadic familiarity. It is observed that epistolary decorum is in most cases unnecessary when a number of more efficient ways of making contact can be called on to convey personal information. But what ought to be observed is that simultaneous, interchangeable use of these other means is also unnecessary. That lack of necessity, in other words, does not fully account for the letter’s demise. Why not admit that the letter has become too difficult? Time-investment and the effort to articulate salient things about ourselves—desires, opinions, experiences—seem more like supernumerary work. It is not that we have become lazy; we have become overworked. With linguistic proficiency honed on bureaucratic tasks, certain uses of language have taken a beating.
§ Other People’s Mail

_in response to Miranda July’s 2013 editorial/curatorial project We Think Alone:_

_And of course while none of these emails were originally intended to be read by me (much less you) they were all carefully selected by their authors in response to my list of email genres — so self-portraiture is quietly at work here. Privacy, the art of it, is evolving. Radical self-exposure and classically manicured discretion can both be powerful, both be elegant. And email itself is changing, none of us use it exactly the same way we did ten years ago; in another ten years we might not use it at all._

What is so new in this project of editing emails with the permission of their authors? The answer is: the curiosity of their editor. Two decades ago, when privacy was still assumed, taken for granted — not yet something we would be wise to divest ourselves of voluntarily before it is taken away from us by force — interest in the workaday (or so July would have us believe) correspondence of obscure collaborators would have been hard to conceive. The place where one sampled letters for different occasions was of course the letter manual, popular since the seventeenth century — a genre of generic epistles from which the collection’s high-profile editor may have taken inspiration. Thus, “An Email That Gives Advice” corresponds to “A Letter of Advice” or “Counsel”; “An Angry Email,” to a “Letter of Remonstrance”; “An Email About Being Sad,” to missives on the death of a loved one; “An Email With I Love You In It,” to one “Upon the Absence of a Mistress”; “An Email That Includes A Picture of Yourself,” to one answering “A Letter Desiring a Mistress’s Picture”; “An Email To Your Mom,” to “A Letter from a Daughter to Her Mother upon Marrying against Her Consent”; “An Email

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About The Body,” to “A Letter Congratulating a Friend on the Recovery of His Health”; “An Email About Money,” to “Letter from a Poor Prisoner to His Creditor”; and so on (the second in each set comes from John Hill’s popular The Young Secretary’s Guide: or, a Speedy Help to Learning of 1687 and many subsequent editions). But I may have hit on a correspondence on another plane: What is We Think Alone if not a letter to the past? Having passed through all the challenges of this curious project we have been bumped to a higher level of understanding: we are precisely not alone when we think.

News of Oneself

The use of epistolary form to communicate one’s ethical knowledge is in keeping with Seneca’s notion that knowledge is “common property” and must be shared, distributed, in order to have any value. His epistles to Lucilius have an overt edifying purpose. They are explicitly meant as moral advice for another individual—as shared wisdom—thus admirably enacting the idea contained in them. Judging from their literary character, they are intended for circulation among a wide circle of readers. The sense of personal disclosure, of a private text being made public, of something previously reserved for one becoming accessible, shareable, helps the text’s ability to garner interest and disseminate its ideas. The provision of moral instruction and the imperative of sociality are two ways in which letters generally can—and Seneca’s letters do—underscore the relationship between literature and ethics.

But Seneca also argues that a moral life can only be sustained if one proceeds as if another conscience were observing one’s doings; one must remain in dialogue with oneself,

* See Seneca, Letters from a Stoic, letters 8, 6, 13.
in a self-critical relationship that is as strong as the criticism of another human being whom one respects, even venerates (letters III, XI). One must to a degree learn to objectify oneself, transcend one’s own empirically conceived ego, while at the same time constituting and maintaining that ego’s integrity. Any act of self-writing involves just that; a distancing of oneself in order to interpret the self as a phenomenon, an existing, conscious and intentional whole—to “[c]arry out a searching analysis and close scrutiny of [one]self in all sorts of different lights” (XVI, p. 63). The act whereby one promotes one’s qualities and sets a moral example is accompanied in Seneca’s writings by an internal critical dialogue that has sought externalization. Anyone capable of judging society, life and what constitutes truth ought to show they are first able to examine and evaluate themselves (III). The correspondence is only an extension of this principle to active, external dialogue.

The notion of “correspondence” is here somewhat misleading, since we read only half of the exchange. The addressee, Lucilius, is an indeterminacy; his words and writing are referred to in Seneca’s responses to him, and so we may fill them in based on context, yet the content of his actual letters remains a matter of conjecture. The idea of physical distance, a necessary condition for communication by letter, parallels psychological self-distancing, necessary to the process of self-criticism. On the textual level this allows Seneca to be selective and falsify himself in interpreting and evaluating himself (XLVI); on the psychic level it helps transcend the immediate experience and take account of one’s life bodily. Lucilius, then, acts as a foil for the author’s self in that his evocation, presence and implied responses provide a pretext for writing and self-dialogizing. While being partially mediated to us by the fictionalized I of Seneca, Lucilius actually serves as an equivocal mediator for Seneca himself.

It lies in both the reader’s (as represented by the pupil Lucilius) and the author’s interest that they be “of the utmost benefit to each other” by way not only of sharing knowledge and company, but also of assisting in inner dialogue and self-criticism — ends to which the epistolary form is
unusually well suited. In this light, Seneca’s “And yet I do not summon you to my side solely for the sake of your own progress but for my own as well…” acquires a new significance (VI, p. 40). The need to displace himself, to represent himself as the relation between two separate characters—as correspondence qua form turns thematic—may indicate that Seneca was working on his own duality, his inner conflicts, and that his self-criticism, in the presence of some unaddressed, interstitial territory of his conscience, could be omissive.” In letter XXVI, for instance, he speaks about the final verdict he will declare upon himself, “determining whether the courageous attitudes I adopt are really felt or just so many words…” (71, my emphasis). This serves to undercut the very sense of writing at the same time that it shows the author on a self-directed ethical quest, actively involved in tutoring himself (an idea voiced on a number of occasions). This quality of Seneca’s writing—as a procedure of working out one’s own moral dilemmas, even if only by proxy and allusion—seems to make it all the more effective as a didactic text.

To a degree, every author is self-reflexively embedded in their writing. Their inner dialogue need not seek expression as literary dialogue. When it does, do we understand them any better? And when it reaches for epistolary form, does the

* However, only from our (post)modern perspective, with our sense of the function of narrative, knowledge of psychology (the means of the constitution, organization and representation of the self) can we conceptualize Seneca as a construct on the textual level, as a fictional character separate from the historical one. It is highly doubtful that Seneca would have consciously designed a fictional version of himself— that he was aware of, and understood, it as a literary device. Rather, it was for him in the nature of letter-writing, when one is at a distance from one’s correspondent, that one interprets himself and often conceals certain flaws (in this case for the purpose of better instruction)— “we still find habit a reason for telling lies.” Ibid., letter 46, p. 90. By writing himself into his own text, he was merely transposing what he thought proper to transpose: an “essential” Seneca, though not a fictional (unreal) one. One must not forget that under Seneca’s pen the letter-form becomes intensely self-referential (without being unnaturally so). He is very conscious of stylistics (especially of falling into poor style), not just in writing but in public speaking. His reflection extends over the entire domain of text- and discourse-production. Ironically, however, it tends to avoid issues of content.
length and depth, honesty and sincerity, of their correspondence have any bearing on our understanding of them? For the writer and reader to benefit each other, mutual understanding must be neither’s aim.

§ True Taste

The writers of today are worried about offending anyone. Imagine a fish that takes itself out of the water, fillets itself, seasons itself to taste, lays itself flat upon a frying pan, then lies down hastily on a bed of garnish—all to ensure the public will devour it. It so wants to be savoured, to melt in the mouths of average diners. It genuinely thinks that freshness and seasoning can distinguish it, tantalizing taste buds without any risks. Except that all this it shares with other fried fish. True taste is distinctness of flavour. All the rest is presentation.
§ Soho!

soho: call used by huntsmen to direct the attention of the dogs or of other hunters to a hare which has been discovered or started, or to encourage them in the chase; hence used as a call to draw the attention of any person, announce a discovery, or the like (OED)

There are words whose different senses seem to have developed through whimsical resemblances and contiguities. The French _bouquin_ is one. Its primary meaning is “book”—as anyone with a decent ear (it is pronounced /bukɛ/) and familiar with Parisian second-hand book vendors, or _bouquinistes_, might guess. More specifically, _bouquin_ (initially spelled _boucquain_) is a “little book” or an “old book,” especially one “thought nothing of.” The nineteenth century adds a further pejorative nuance: a book that “though modern has no other value besides that of its curlicues.” Around this time, too, the word comes to mean “book” in popular parlance.

But _bouquin_ has a still richer history. In the middle of the eighteenth century it was borrowed by huntsmen. Not (yet) book-chasers, but hunters of rabbit and hare. Aside from a phonetic closeness (_livre, lièvre_), the resemblance between (old, likely male) books and rabbits (also old, buck) might escape us at first. But perhaps, as registered by this lexical twist, what unites the book and hare is their pursuit, until the very end, of their respective lives, measured in leaps and pages.

The use of _bouquin_ as a hunting term did not start there. Sometime in the sixteenth century it came to signify the opening of a hunting-horn used in rabbiting, a _cornet à bouquin_. The connection to horns had also made it handy for an “old billy goat,” from which later arose the meaning of “satyr” and “roué.” The main association of _bouquin_ with the cornet, however, seems to be oral in origin, possibly via _bucca_, Latin for “mouth.” From there the word travelled to the bohemian land of pipes, specifically their horn mouthpieces.*

Having followed awhile in the tracks of etymologists, we begin to piece together a strange picture out of the history of one French disyllable: a *bouquin*-blower, *bouquin*-catcher, *bouquin*-puffer, *bouquin*-lover and, finally, -devourer!
At the Stalls

We have translated the idea of *browsing* — derived from feeding on tree leaves and shoots, said of goats, deer and cattle — into the digital realm quite seamlessly. Lost, however, are its public *scenes*, moments of absorption, the search for the unknown work not as a commodity, but as unadulterated use-value. The hope for serendipity is part of it from the start, and there are some who hope for the lucky find they can then cash in on.

If one has ever looked at those who still routinely engage in browsing bookshop stalls, one might wonder whether the demographic committed to this activity has changed over the years. One look at Paul Gavarni’s physiognomy of an urban loafer, observed *en passant* in the middle of the nineteenth century, makes its caption all but redundant: “If I could read I’d never read such old editions.” The gaunt-faced, no-longer-young man in the picture is attracted to the wares of a bouquinist as he might be to a parallel universe, strange and inaccessible to him, for whose opacity he compensates with hands-in-pockets disdain. Likely uneducated, he seems without any prospect of the leisure required to make his wish (grudgingly in the conditional) come true. Behind him, two legitimate browsers peruse the volumes. Encounters with unfamiliar books did not typically involve reverence, the piety of the meek and unschooled — if such indeed is in evidence here. At the opposite, equally eccentric end stands a *vieux savant’s* ecstatic immersion, in another engraving aptly titled “An Orgy.” Before him lie worn volumes offering themselves cheaply — just 50 centimes! His browsing is hands-on, open-mouthed. Even if the goods for sale are not the most desirable, their sheer volume, the possibilities they open up, invite a thousand caresses.
Why I’m Not a Book Addict

A book addict shouldn’t care what they read as long as they get their fix . . .

What Are Shelves For

Someone had made a joke about the spurious popularity of empty shelf photographs, or empty “shelfies.” But who needs real shelves anymore? Have they ever served any other purpose than holding books?

Even bookshelves migrate. Sooner or later you will take screen shots of your virtual ones, similarly divested. From there you will move on to your mental bookcases, clearing out turgid nonsense taking up precious thinking space. That much more access to the little of it that’s left!

Suddenly, everything will click. Emptying all those shelves, embedded so deeply, was freeing us from self-incurred tute-lage for an age of clarity. In our dotage we will have just two tomes to take pages from, dangling from our virtual girdles in imitation of medieval monks to protect them from thieves: a sottisier and a “bible,” a book of jokes and a book of truths.

* This is not to be confused with the “shareable selfie,” also called Shelfie.
§ Will-o’-the-Wisp

But perhaps you feel the world is bright already? You have a stack of newspapers, digital edition, which you keep burning through. No sooner is the screen illuminated than the message begins its rapid decay.

Isn’t that just how you want it? Plus, there are lights in neighbouring windows, street lamps, and — damn it — the sun! Plenty of light to see by. At least along your path, no need to watch your step.
“I am loath even to have thoughts I cannot publish”*

The economic cheapness of digital publication democratizes expression and gives a necessary public to writers, and types of writing, that otherwise would be confined to the hard drive or the desk drawer. And yet the supreme ease of putting words online has opened up vast new space for carelessness, confusion, whateverism.

—n+1, 2012†

Is the strict correspondence of thinking and publicizing not a concrete and universal expression of Kant’s practical philosophy? The achievement of the Digital Age is finally clear: the running commentary on ourselves and our world that fills the blogoverse is the global flowering of public discourse.

On the one hand, self-loathing now precedes self-censorship and critically cuts much deeper. We no longer excise the bad, the unpublishable, from our thoughts; we get its sources out of our system before they become thoughts or sweep them into some designated unconscious, where they remain safe, pathetic, and innocuous.

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* Michel de Montaigne, “On Some Lines of Virgil,” in The Complete Essays, trans. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin, 1991), 953. The same line in context, in another translation: “I have ordered myself to dare to say all that I dare to do, and I dislike even thoughts that are unpublishable. The worst of my actions and conditions does not seem to me so ugly as the cowardice of not daring to avow it. Everyone is discreet in confession; people should be so in action. Boldness in sinning is somewhat compensated and bridled by boldness in confessing. Whoever would oblige himself to tell all, would oblige himself not to do anything about which we are constrained to keep silent. God grant that this excessive license of mine may encourage our men to attain freedom, rising above these cowardly and hypocritical virtues born of our imperfections; that at the expense of my immoderation I may draw them on to the point of reason. A man must see his vice and study it to tell about it. Those who hide it from others ordinarily hide it from themselves. And they do not consider it covered up enough if they themselves see it; they withdraw it from their own conscience.” The Complete Essays of Montaigne, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), 642.

† Editorial, “Please RT,” n+1 14 (June 14, 2012).
On the other hand, and it is a huge other hand, are we still having thoughts worth having? A troll of a question visits the digital fora of the West: if everything is permitted, is anything worth saying? Psychopaths may spin their schemes of revenge and suicides perform their finales, but do we take them seriously? Will there soon be anyone left to care about what we publish enough to police it? Saying is still worth doing, but making sense hardly matters. “Anything’s sayable and nothing’s worth saying—How can you stand it? Do something! Say something!!”—tweets the hobgoblin, and gets retweeted. But can the hogs of attention appreciate such pearls?

So we are back to square one as concerns a standard of public discourse. The Enlightenment model has been buried; for the newcomers, it is as good as dead. They are on their own.
§ Grasping Criticism

“Criticizing everything but accomplishing nothing. That is the world’s nature; it cannot get away from it,” writes Luther (with biting criticism of course) in his open letter on translating the Bible. And here is Marx in a personal letter to his friend: “what we have to accomplish at present: I am referring to ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.”† Two countervailing views: theological and anti-theological. Why should criticism have no redeeming qualities for Luther? Its reach exceeded its grasp, even in textual form. Why should Marx have had such high hopes for criticism? Because it grasped so much.

§ Mushy Criticism

A soft spot for the opponent in a political debate indexes decay in one’s own position.

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Criticism as Self-Examination

Critical exercises can be tools of self-discovery just as interval training can act as a coherence test for one’s ideas, not to mention boosting their resilience and versatility. Short critical drills can lay bare what one “really thinks.” The choice of object to criticize reflects not only what’s “trending” in critical opinion, or the limits of one’s interest, but also which ideas one is inclined to interrogate and which completely to avoid — out of habit and bias, if not simple blindness. If one is at a loss for ideas, intensive bursts of critique might help decide where to go from “here.” If, on the contrary, one’s thoughts come out pure muscle, metabolically freakish, one might be jolted to run as far as possible in a different direction.
§ Murine Criticism

*The German Ideology*, written by Marx and Engels in 1845–46, while they were still in their twenties, was for complicated reasons published only after Marx’s death in 1883 (twelve years after his first *New York Times* obituary). Engels thought this no great misfortune, since the book’s chief purpose was its authors’ “self-clarification,” in which respect it was a great success. What needed clarifying was their own, materialist philosophy of history, starkly opposed to that of the German idealists. This clarification took the form of ruthless take-downs of the leading figures of post-Hegelian thought in Germany, turning them out as Saints (“Saint Max,” “Saint Bruno”…). And if this bold mock-theological design were not refreshing enough, there is ingenuity in the details, the relish of youth poking fun at others’ philosophical and political weakness, armed with the wisdom of Shakespeare, the wit of Cervantes, the spirit of Goethe, and social critique in the guise of nursery rhymes. When you hear of all this crisp prose, flower of nineteenth-century German *Bildung*, languishing in a drawer—“abandoned,” as Marx put it, “to the gnawing criticism of mice”—you might find yourself envying the mice. For anyone curious about Marxism, I can think of no better place to start than this attic of Marx and Engels’ Brusselian collaboration. But there is a lesson in it writers would do well to learn: that books can be written solely to clear up one’s thinking, and anything left over belongs to the mice.

The Draft

On the wall of his study, the novelist Émile Zola is said to have written these words: “not a day without a line” (*nulla dies sine linea*). The line had previously belonged to the painter Apelles, and pertained to the “lines” of his art, as noted by Pliny. In this sense also it was adopted by Van Gogh—for all his incessant correspondence, which anyhow frequently combined text and sketches.

The draughtsman’s table is so much larger than an esquis- toile, and no sooner than a choice is made of paper stock that this difference seems justified. The *draft* may be where the draughtsman and the writer part ways, but it is itself a fork in the road, with two paths open to them both: the writer can choose to sketch out his thought instead of making an arrangement of words, and the pencil accustomed to lines can rather trace letters. The successful draft is just a few strokes away, strokes that capture the essentials. What does it matter which system is used to make them, so long as they are indeed the essential ones?
§ Around the Block

Subtle connections exist between our limbs and our memories. One hears of longhand as a method of retrieving material one had *written down* in the past, in school exercise books. What might not come back to us if we could pick up a pen with our foot and write without effort? What dormant knowledge would return from down there, so far from our brain? Is it something to be wondered at, and never attempted? One imagines the Writer, in their well-known exigency—to overcome the Block—will one day give the conjuring hand a rest. *Dexterity*, after all, was never a professional requirement!

§ Keeping Up with the Joneses

The *writer’s block* is necessarily short; writers must keep up professional appearances. A city of *reader’s blocks* is spread out, with impressive facades and buildings never lived in. Reading is not a profession, but the hang-ups around it reference social standards that isolate those who fall short of them even more.

§ On the Rails

What you have long dreamed of is about to become reality. Your writing will be your ticket, procrastinators shall be shifted to the last car, and impostors thrown off immediately. Yet this dedicated *writer’s train* of which you hear tell—the writing machine par excellence, our definitive solution to distraction—will arrive too late for some. The rumble and screech of hurtling metal are today much too subtle for them to dictate the rhythm of words.
§ Zoning In

There exists a mental space—or perhaps it is continually created—where a writer hears nothing but the beat of their thought, and sometimes even this fades away completely, leaving only the thought itself. This is called “being in the zone.” “Flow” is another term for this peculiar and highly coveted state of mind, though not in the idiomatic sense of “going with the flow.”

Certain authors, especially when all their books are read in one go, seem never to have left “the zone” in their life. Singling out one work of theirs as superior takes a special kind of rudeness—if, that is, we aspire to the “writing life” ourselves. (If all we seek is “the best,” then the same selection is proof of uncommon discernment.) But if, like me, you are a writer in search of the zone, you see the oeuvre as a series of signposts showing you the way.

“Innovators astonish us by the total development of their practice, not by each work taken singly,” says Michael Krausz. They astonish even more when the totality of their practice displays an unabated stream of enthusiasm and skill. Of such writers it could be said that one has no desire to meet them in biographies, but only ever in “the zone.”

The Easygoing Work

We adore some books for their undemanding nature. It is enough to graze in their folds, to fall in innocent calf love, free of elaborate courtship and head-scratching stress. Because, let’s face it, we sometimes tire of the demand to mean, which authors make of us.

With a surge of relief, we are moved to ourselves compose an easygoing work, expressing our bliss in a reprieve from meaning. And touring such a book our expectations of our readers are correspondingly few: mooing is approbation, the Q & A is a cinch, and all that we ask is to meet up “like cows in the meadow.”

The Easy Part

advice to first-time novelists

A splash is a splash, whether it’s wet or red. Making a splash in a pool of water is easier on the eyes, compared to splattering on concrete. Unless you already know how to swim or put yourself back together, it’s the recovery you should be worried about.

Dying instantly, on the spot, seems preferable to drowning in your own success.

The success all artists should fear is the *succès d’estime*, being lionized by the critics but ignored by the wider public. The danger lies in that overestimation of our achievement known as *mastery*. (Mastery is what an artist who wants to be loved by the public does not claim; arrogance loses him popular favour.) For this misfortune there are only two forms of damage control. The first, requiring more effort, is to imagine ourselves the laughing stock of past masters (standing before a mirror with a degree in our art might be enough). The second, with more to recommend it, is to pump oneself full of *depressants*, and in a manner of hours feel all trace of self-esteem dissolve. I understand the trend these days runs the other way, but so do critics’ artists with their successes. You will no doubt want to say: “What’s done is done! Let the poor deluded devils be.” Indeed, the memory of a *succès d’estime* is preferable to the failure to surpass one’s own estimation.

You call yourself a “writer’s writer,” but are there any writers actually reading you, whom you know of, let alone care about?
§ Out Like a Light

Awareness of advanced years or signs of fatigue in illustrious figures in our field of endeavor is the source of subliminal anxiety among us lesser lights. We fear that once their creativity is extinguished, we too might be suddenly put out, like candles at a party once the guest of honour has departed.
§ Bridge of Boats

From book to book a writer crosses the river of what is thought and said, flowing unrecorded. Sometimes, out of hunger, he lowers himself down and fishes out an idea. His books are like barges or lily-pads strung together, eventually stretching across. It may be that others, the so-called disciples, are crossing the water behind him. When they have reached his latest, they must wait until he has again accomplished his feat of organic verbal engineering.

But most likely he is alone. To Nietzsche’s “To write in order to triumph. Writing should always mark a triumph,” and his description of his works as a record “only of my overcomings,” I respond: “My thought exactly, even if it’s juvenile showmanship.” To be exciting, writing must be competitive, rewarded by personal fulfillment. At every step, the writer competes against the inertia of self-consistency and repetition. It makes little difference who looks on, how many pairs of eyes follow the progress of the champion-engineer.

But the metaphor of books keeping the writer afloat can be drawn out even more. Once they have been brought in line, they are tethered together. Most books from one pen are fissions—owing to the writer’s embarrassment, worsened by middling reviews, or to envy between his books, the earlier of the later, the younger of the older. Yet it is not uncommon for those books that do the bridging, the main works, to have (despite disagreements) the sense to stick together. Some of them have no doubt been made for the sake of the others, the less fortunate ones, to pull them out of the murk into which they are plunged by a moment’s of public inattention. They exist against the remainder, as life-savers—we are anyhow speaking only of after-lives—giving the books thus rescued, half-submerged, a place in the succession. It’s only much later, once our author has crossed the water and is no more, that the initially more successful of the lineage drift off.

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leaving behind the saved, the nearly drowned, like islands in an archipelago, each home to a different species of bird.

The Author’s Two Bodies

Contrary to the institution of monarchy, that of literature admits of many kings within one (linguistically defined) realm. The body-natural of every literary royalty remains the same, but for aging, while the body-literary changes with each book. In their collected works, the book-lives of that published royal corpus are ostended, “laid out,” like the cadavers they are, “end to end,” to borrow Chateaubriand’s haunting phrase. The perishable body may go on to outlast those thus coffined for public viewing; a writer may decide not to write and remain king to the very end, and may thus see their complete oeuvre interred before them. The tomb of literary consecration only proving more durable in the long run.

Inside the Tomb

My ideal language is epitaphic, a language of considerate brevity that honors the dead, their wish to be remembered. It is, at the same time, a language that is posthumous, freed from concerns over its timeliness or untimeliness and addressed to those who are still alive. As epitaphic, it is a language timeless enough to be carved in stone; as posthumous, it is impossible to write in while one is still alive. My ideal language is writing (in any language) that has these two characteristics. Writing done in this language is my inscription on the tomb of the past, but only if I am also already inside the tomb.
§ “Come, my cold and stiff companion!”

There are places where the authors we love because they mirror our thoughts and moods, or because we fit theirs so well, cannot follow us. We drag them along until the first tug of loneliness makes us pull too hard and they fall over like dummies—whereupon from sheer embarrassment we finally take our leave of them.

§ Safer Bet

Writers worth their salt do not wish to represent their time any more than for their time to represent them; they transcend both sorts of egoism. Their ties to the present are a historical accident, which nothing compels them to address. Writing only for posterity, on the other hand, is too risky; one’s audience is one great unknown. That leaves our ancestors, a safer bet: and even here just the literary ones.

Leaving One’s Mark

Making a contribution nowadays is subordinated to carving a niche for oneself, even if one is part of a team. It is the only way one can hope to stand out: individual contributions increasingly stand out only in kinds.

That is why “making it” more and more resembles what dogs and cats do to mark their territory. That in turn is why, on the face of it, the choice — cat or dog, loner or collaborator — seems to be exactly as before.

Literary Sensation

It is to the market that we owe literary sensations, the “must-reads” that each season monopolize our attention. The excitement around certain releases goes a long way to offset the daily anxieties and general insecurity of the book economy. Oh the fun of bestseller lists! And the thrill of (the last remaining independent) bookstore queue! How can any of this be a sign of ill health, if the success of a few luminaries means death for those playing with such unsensational stakes?
§ High and Low

It’s time we rejected the distinction between high- and lowbrow as it now stands. Not the distinction as such, just the significance of the height of the forehead and size of the supraorbital ridge. No rejection is effective without broad consensus, as in this case it is bound not to be. And no unpopular rejection holds unless a replacement so innocuous and intuitive is found that the majority won’t even notice anything is amiss. From now on highbrow will mean “what surprises,” and lowbrow, “what causes dismay, by being determined to say clearly and only one thing.”

§ Castoffs

A You have to be a master of your art to leave perfect images on the cutting-room floor. Sometimes a great image, scene, line, word, piece has no place in a sequence and must be discarded.

B Yet we always doubt the master’s mastery when we wish to see what he chose not to show us. Suppose Bach dropped some notes here and there and we nevertheless asked to hear them, what could it mean except that we might know better and judge differently? If we allow the latter, then we value our judgment above his. And if we agree with his decisions, our homage to his mastery is thoroughly compromised.
§ Claqueurs

Serious, self-respecting artists do not waste time answering their critics. Instead, most work harder to cater to their taste. It is different with discourse, broadly speaking, where response and argument are considered the norm. In art, however, disputes of taste and truth can take place in silence; here critics prick up their ears and open their eyes long after the claqueurs have gone home.
§ No-Power

Nearly all men are slaves for the same reason that the Spartans assigned for the servitude of the Persians—lack of power to pronounce the syllable, No. To be able to utter that word and live alone, are the only two means to preserve one’s freedom and one’s character.

—Nicholas Chamfort

Negation is a positive element of the whole.

—Stanisław Jerzy Lec*

It is of course not enough to say no. You need to say more, to elaborate. You can get away with naysaying only if the feedback is overwhelmingly positive—which, within the academic humanities, plagued by post-structuralist self-doubt, almost never happens. There saying no amounts to murder-suicide. Survival is one big hug all around. Division, negativity, disagreement are out of the question (in contrast to the sciences, which need disagreement like air to breathe). In these hard times, humanists must “like” one another. They must hold hands in a festival of mutual affirmation.

In reality, however, it is humanities “outreach” as eloquent polemic, contrarianism and indignation, provocative and barefaced, wielding the rhetoric of being-against, that for the time being gives humanists a stay of execution (the public takes note of dissent, and always wants more). The professors who quietly rail against the corporate world, afraid of offending their students, must recognize to whom they owe their respite: not to those higher up their greasy pole, who still shit on them, but to those on whom they just yesterday still openly… frowned.

* Chamfort, Cynic’s Breviary, l. 17; Lec, Myśli nieuczesane, 62.
§ Public Intellectual

Intellectuals today are compelled to “go public” if they want to remain intellectuals.

§ Following Leaders

Followers on social media platforms possess an uncanny influence over existing relations of power. Twitter use poses a danger for any fixed attitudes towards political rulers. For many who are on it, following emerging “leaders,” whose simultaneous status as “followers” is a matter of course, is part of a strategy to expand their own power base, and eventually to rise in standing themselves. As if that were not enough, the medium is a laboratory of dematerialized group behaviour, where those with a scientific bent can put their hypotheses to the test. In short, anyone who wishes to build a following will do well by being an avid follower, opportunistically. In this environment, the words of Ledru-Rollin continue to resonate: “There go the people. I must follow them, for I am their leader.”

Leading Motives

The *leitmotif* often emerges late in the process of literary creation or reception; so, too, born leaders emerge or are recognized only when their followers are ready for them.

Easy Pickings (A Lamb Is a Lamb)

Many would swear it is better to be a bell-wether, leader of a flock, than a lone wolf. But the lone wolf begs to differ by licking his chops. (The bell he donates to a lone biker, to ward off demons on the road—which shows him to be not only better off, but good.)

Decoration

With some exceptions, self-glorification is the opposite of self-torment, yet wants it presupposed: it keeps it in sight like a Sword of Damocles, but on tougher string.
§ Common, senses of

What is dismissed as common nonsense often makes uncom-
mon sense.

§ Madness in Literature

The writing of derangement under the aegis of literature,
like the painting of outsider art, puts culture into question—
and redeems it as well.

§ Ouroborous

We are undermining the value of critical literary study out-
side of literary practice, which not coincidentally is begin-
ning to take itself—literature, contemporary and histori-
cal—for its object.

§ In the Tower

In the Tower of Babel, “experimental” literature had the last
floor. That was as far as the builders got before their tongues
became confused.
§ Experimentalism

It is a lamentable if common misunderstanding that literary experiments, including highly conceptual ones that border on visual art, are by definition trying and difficult for the average reader. It is thought (and quixotically disbelieved) that the audience needs to be educated to appreciate them, preferably by being brought up on what we would now call the experimental tradition that properly begins with Modernism. In fact, difficulty and sciolistic requirements of this sort have little to do with a work’s being experimental. The condition of experimentality is testing not the public’s patience, but the author’s. The experiment is not, in other words, on the reader but on the maker of the experiment. It is not about pushing the limits of convention to see what will fly, but about what can be stood — endured — in the process of writing.

Before accusing me of measuring experimentation by a personal yardstick, come up with an alternative that will knock literature out of its present comfort zone.

§ Paradoxes of Experimentalism

Experimental literature needs experimental publishing — publishing that, like it, can afford to fail completely. In this it differs from experimental science, which recognizes the principle as self-evident without presenting an actual liability to scientific publishing.
§ Tapped Potential

As counter-logic to literature’s Enlightenment-era institutionalization, the French “workshop of potential literature,” or Oulipo, pushed the idea of the scientific institution to an absurd extreme. It appropriated the circular logics of calculation and relentless experimentation, of rationalization and scientificity, adopting them where they were least expected—in the workroom of creativity. Rigid mechanical procedures became the enabling and ordering principles for some of the most singular creative productions ever undertaken. Its great achievement was twofold: first, in demonstrating the compatibility of technical constraints (linguistic, mathematical, logical) with even the most extravagant literary experimentation, building on precursors like Raymond Roussel; and, second, in underscoring the fundamental arbitrariness of such constraints. The operation thus went well beyond subversion and parody—well beyond having fun with the rigid and self-imposed rules of a confident rationality. In this way, the experiments of Oulipo helped turn institutionalized reason against itself, commandeering what was alien and threatening to it. The power of certain literature to exorcise the evils of rationality may be exaggerated. But, unlike some reason, some superstition never killed anyone.
§ Magpies

It will strike those convinced art in general is, and has long been, chiefly about vanguard innovation as false that, at least in the case of literary art, the loudest voices are conservative. To think how much energy has been expended to conserve the tradition and defend the classics from attacks on literature as art, rather than mere wordplay or verbal communication.

How different things are with visual art, which, since the dramatic strides of literacy across the globe, has thrown off much of its former functional, didactic constraints. An enormous boon came to it in the form of mass advertising, opening up new visual horizons rather than limiting them; marketing, after all, reconceived the message along subliminal lines, relying not on verbal but on sub-verbal cues. Surrealist imagery sold commodities like surrealist poetry never could. (Design was another natural home for visual experimentation.)

Experiments in literature, by contrast, have rarely been met with the fanfare lavished on the plastic arts, and in their heyday relied on graphic embellishment. The vertiginous fall in the prospects of literary experimenters corresponds closely to the stratospheric rise of money and media attention given to visual art. If institutionally art and creative writing seem to be on par, professionally they have never been more divergent. Until a new, economically viable model is found to secure a future for the professional creative writer, experimentation will be a luxury at which the republic of letters looks askance.
§ Error Spotters

From the decline in errata we can reason that either we are making fewer errors in print or fewer of us notice them, which may mean their number is on the rise. Regardless, we do not bother publishing errata as we used to; mistakes have become too expensive to fix. It is more prudent to leave correcting to the next edition. Response and demand will tell if it is needed at all.

The drop in errata is the surest sign of disinvestment in the medium of print. Perhaps e-books are emended by elves to perfection, and error-free when printed on demand? Most likely remain untouched, attention to detail falling with increased volume. But there are always readers bothered by error in the most obscure spots. A way might be found to import their corrections. The time has come for crowd-sourced errata and critical re-edicions — focalized, rather than scattered across readers’ personal sites. But the copyright holders are not ready for this, and also not doing their job as in decades past. So we may be forgiven for thinking of telling them to “s**t or get off the pot.” Until flawless versions are produced, be it by publishers’ elves or freelance pedants on the web, we must write our own corrigenda, or give up on errors on the spot.
§ Scribes

Centuries after the mass die-off of monastic scribes as a consequence of Gutenberg’s invention, the Google Books project is bringing them back. They are now the human operators of OCR scanners. But their breed will soon disappear again until a time when a thorough review and philological rectification of the greatest error-riddled digital library the world has ever seen can no longer be postponed. Consider at random what they shall then have to reckon with:

All the finest feelings, he insisted, were strongest in the country; conjugal and parental affection, in particular, the source of all that is good, were very much blunted, in great cities, by the attention, imagination, and passions being divided among different women. “If men will live in crowded cities,” said he, “the women should be confined, “as in Asia, in harams. I am told, Li that the great business of the fine G3 «hfolks ”folks in London, is, to debauch the u women, who, on their parts, are not a little vain of being thought worthy of being vessels of dishonour a to the men.” But there was an air of whim in all that this singular person did, as well as of sense in all that he said. In the midst of this conversation, after supper, a mephitic air was perceived, of which the dog, who sat near the door, was suspected of having been the chymist.

Our neo-scribes will be no less silent and absorbed in their labour than the scribes of old—for this time around they will be thoroughly mechanized.

§ Inkhorn

Before you level at me the charge of *inkhorn writer*, you must try to understand my reason for choosing “bookish words”: they remind me there used to be such things as books.

§ Wordsmith

A I use neither paper nor pen.

B And you call yourself a writer?

A Just as the theremin player calls herself a musician; it is proximity and attunement to one’s instrument that matters. My brains are still where they should be: close to my hands, which roam a plastic keyboard (though I imagine not for much longer). Is what I describe any more outrageous than writing with my foot, or hammering out words as one does objects in a smithy?
§ Feathers

As I abandon paper and pen in favour of the keyboard, I hardly remember anymore what it was like to write long-hand. At such times I stop typing and sign my name, just to make sure. But even this signature will disappear soon, when we revert to dyscriptia by signing with fingerprints. As I inspect it, on a sheet of low-grade paper stock, I notice its “feathers” or fuzzy edges; they resemble stray letters through a magnifying glass. Poring over these subvisible arabesques, these microscript accidents, too weak-eyed to decipher them, gives me pleasure.

But perhaps this is only a distraction, a fascination that everything analogue will hold for us. We will certainly find ways to recreate feathering, even if writing longhand will not last.

§ Coincidence of Invention

We meet over the page of a book. This book. Where I exist only thanks to you. And you, only thanks to me. You and I, we are creating each other right now. You the reader exist as long as you are with me (that much I guarantee). I the writer come in the same, accompanied way.

My physical status as a living person has nothing any more to do with me; “I” might even already have passed on. But I’ve no doubt that I still live, at least for you, even if our lives would be nothing without “you,” there, reading this.
§ Philobiblon

Love affair with books? For the bookworms! How much more value in a good breakup; you get through more books! A healthy relationship of man and book is when they argue and move on.

§ Arks Out

With Noah in mind, we take one of every kind. We are forgiven for thinking that we singlehandedly save older, near-forgotten specimens from certain oblivion. And, given our limited time, capacity, and the taboo against reproduction, why should we take pairs over more ones-of-a-kind?

And thus those who love to read keep the worthy books afloat when new ones flood the market. It is this annual flood on which literary art drifts.

§ Jazz Funeral

There may be many parties celebrating your successes while you are still alive. But your posthumous fame—that gets decided at the wake, after you’re gone. A wake can go one of two ways. You might get resurrected. Or put your celebrants to sleep.
Fans

In music and film, there is still a healthy ratio of producers to fans. I mean just fans. In literature, the fans are neither just fans, nor just.

Copycats

Copycats may spread a work’s fame far and wide, but they rob the original of its distinction.

Non-Potable

Some sources of inspiration are just polluted wells.

Seniority

There are those who come to us, and those to whom we must come, in the guise of dreams, ghosts, or beggars.
§ “My Undertaking”

Why does the grim ring of that expression strike me only now? I was too keen to escape the infantile ring of “my project.”

§ A Nagging Burden

Those still chasing chimeras are the lucky ones; they don’t have one riding on their back. And it can be “as heavy as a sack of flour or coal,” or—which is worse—no longer felt to be a burden at all.

§ Loose Moorings

Tie your moorings loosely to ship out quickly, or else be ready to jump ship at the first signal. Often the greater risk is not shipwreck, but delay.

§ Credo

The aphorist: the houdini of reason.

§ The Burning Book

A book too burns without being consumed. All it takes is a mind.

§ Out of Reach

Some books are best kept out of reach of children. They might yet make something of them.

§ Endings

Can be eelusory.