



# Writing Against Your Life

(The 1986 “Gift of Fire” Speech)

by Richard Mitchell



[Presented at a writers’ conference in Southern California in 1986.]

I was fascinated by the title of your conference, “Writing for Your Life.” It’s a remarkably ambiguous title, which allows for all sorts of interpretations. The first one that came to my mind was by analogy with the expression, “Run for your life.” And I tried to imagine the circumstances under which one would say to another, “My God, write for your life!” I confess I haven’t yet fully imagined those circumstances, but I am working on it.

Then there was the possibility of “writing for life,” meaning something like a sentence, being sentenced to writing for life. This was especially congenial to me, because I will have to say it right out that I do not like writing. It’s worse than that—I hate writing. I love the telephone, I think Jane this morning was uninterruptible by telephone—I am so interruptible, that if I am in the middle of a sentence, and the girl from Omaha State calls to sell me something for Christmas, I love her . . . I want her to be mine, forever.

I once gave a lecture at the college where I teach—a public lecture, I try not to do that because I don’t like those people—and I had not spoken in public on the campus for about five years—I had been busy with less important things, I guess—but I chose, as I always do, a title for my lecture long before I had any idea what was going to be in it, and the title was “Five Years of Solitary Confinement.” Because in effect I had spent those last five years writing, and writing is, to me, solitary confinement, very very hateful, painful, and lonely.

But I didn’t think that was what you meant by writing for your life. I suppose what you meant—I don’t know who “you” is, actually, when I say this—was something positive, something favorable—writing for your life, in behalf of it, in favor of your life in some way, and so I had to reflect on that, and in reflecting on that it occurred to me, I don’t think of writing that way, I think of writing as being, if anything, against my life. And then it occurred to me that maybe that’s not so bad, and if I were to suggest writing to another human being—a very bad act, I think—but if I were to suggest it to another human being, I would suggest it because that human being needs something against his life, something to change it in some drastic way, by which I would mean, his life was not in good condition, and he had damn well better write, to destroy it. And it is with that in mind that I speak.

I spoke, not long ago, to another group, not as large as this, of people who call themselves the Mensans—perhaps some of you have heard of an organization called, “MENSA.” It is an organization of terribly intelligent people. I have heard in the meantime of another organization called DENSA [laughter]—really, I am not kidding, there is an outfit called DENSA. If any of you have an application form please leave it with me, I want to join up.

I went to speak to them in the morning; they were having an all-day meeting in some hotel in Philadelphia, which is quite near me, so it was not a burden, and they were going to start the day with hearing some sort of a speech from me, and I rushed in, full of trepidation. Now these are the smartest people in America, indubitably—and I was sure I could not be one of them—and, only two days before the schedule for this lecture I had heard a man mention, in random conversation, something called the “lexigraphical fallacy.” Now, I had every intention of going home to look up the “lexigraphical fallacy,” and driving into Philadelphia it occurred to me that I had not looked it up, and that therefore I was sure to commit it, and I would furthermore commit it in front of the smartest people in America, and they would fall laughing on the floor—I was very nervous—I feared I might not even get coffee or cakes from them...

I got to the convention, I got there, and I was all alone, in this big lobby, except there was a girl

sitting at a table registering people, and I said I was here for the convocation, and this girl said, “Oh, well, everybody’s upstairs in room something or other, and I said “Well, I don’t know if I should go up; I’m the speaker.” She said, “You have to understand that Mensans never do anything on time.”

I always resent it when somebody tells me what I have to understand. It flavored the rest of the day. I went upstairs, where they were all having coffee, and I did get some, but nobody spoke to me because they were all watching television. So I went back downstairs and said I would wait in the lobby until they were ready to come down and convene.

Now, I had planned to speak to the Mensans about the god Prometheus. One of my favorite characters, I speak of him and think of him and write of him often. Because the god Prometheus is the god who is said by the Greeks to have given us—not just fire; indeed, in his little speech in the play by Aeschylus he doesn’t even mention fire—but to have given us mind. He tells what man was like before his gift. Like animals, we were, like herds, we blindly floundered on from day to day until he gave us various gifts—among them, language; the high art of number; the possibility of planning. He gave us in effect everything we think of as our humanness, our selfness: he gave us mind, and the grasp of mind. Mind’s own ability to consider itself. And before that we were like the zebras, or the aardvarks, probably living rather well—probably living better than afterwards—but differently—and it was Prometheus, whose very name means the ability to look ahead, who made us thoroughly human, and I knew the Mensans were interested in their minds, so I thought it would be good to talk about Prometheus.

As I brooded on this I picked up some papers, lying on the table there, and they turned out to be sample tests for Mensans. Little tests on how to get into Mensa. Uh, you have to take a test to get into Mensa, you don’t just go in there—you must be admitted, and you must have a certain score. And I looked at the tests, again fearful of the lexicographical fallacy—and it was a wonderful test. In some ways it took me home again. It took me into childhood, and all the warmth and comfort ... it was like Oreo cookies and milk. Because the first question on the test was a train question.

God, I love a train question. You know: Train A leaves the city of B at hour C and proceeds at rate D towards E. In the meantime train F leaves the city of E at time G and proceeds at rate H towards the destination of city A. And, well, where do they cross? When will these trains ... just a beautiful question. I saw so many of those in my childhood.

And it was laden with metaphoric power, too, because when I was a little kid I traveled often back and forth to Chicago, and we didn’t have airplanes in those days. We went by the Twentieth Century Limited, a train which ran overnight between New York and Chicago, and the railroad people advertised that train in a very beautiful way. They had a marvelous picture, and the point of the picture was to show how regular the scheduling of these trains were, because they could go to a certain place, out in Buffalo, I think, and point to the very spot where the Centuries passed. And sure enough, every day—maybe twice a day—the Centuries would meet each other at that spot and shoot by. And that—just a train problem right before your eyes.

Another question that was not quite so homey but was pretty good was about Bob and Carol and Alice and Ted. And Bob and Carol and Alice and Ted all took the Mensa test. Now, Bob scored ten points more than Carol. However, one-half of the total of the scores of Bob and Carol, multiplied by 1.4, was equivalent to the math scores of Alice and Ted. Ted’s score, however, was either eleven percent greater or eleven percent less than Alice’s. . . . Which of them got into Mensa?

That was a very good question. It was too much for me, but it was good.

And then there was one of those SAT questions, or IQ—you have this little diagram here with some lines, and over here there was another little diagram, and you have to figure out what do you do to that little diagram, which has already been done to this little diagram, to make it into which one of these six little diagrams down here? And that was good, it was a good question. I liked the diagrams a lot. But I was unable to handle any of these questions, and I fell to brooding, and as I brooded I looked up, and sitting right across from me—there was sort of a coffee table with settees on either side in the lobby—I saw the god Prometheus himself.

You can imagine—well, what a strange mixture of awe, and pleasure, and . . . confirmation, in a

way. And—believe me, when you see a god you know it—I said, “Sir, sir, how good to see you here . . .” and he said, “Yes, well, I have come from a long long way away today, on a very special mission. I have noticed you sitting here and I can tell from your demeanor, and from your—wardrobe, that you are probably in the mind business, and I wonder if you could answer a question for me. I’d like to know about that gift I gave you and all of your friends—you remember a long time ago I gave you a certain gift, and I spent a long time paying for that, but now that I’m free to wander I thought I’d check up and see what you’re doing.”

I said, “Sir,” I said, “You have come to the right place. And to the right man, indeed, I am in the mind business. I don’t carry anything. I don’t paint, I don’t tighten screws. I just do mind work. What is it you would like to know?”

He said, “Well, what goodness have you had? What achievements can you show from the gift of mind?”

“Oh,” I said. “How lucky. How lucky that you came on this day. Let me give you an example. Just imagine that a train—‘Train A leaves city B...’” and I recited the whole thing to him, but he didn’t seem to react in any way. He gazed at me, very steadily. I felt somehow I hadn’t stated our case. I rushed on, I said, “Uh, haba, how about, uh . . . Bob, and Carol, and Alice and Ted, and do you realize, sir, what we can do with our minds, with our unaided—well, some of us can do it—we can tell you where those trains will pass, and who got into Mensa . . .”

He looked at me, and he got up, and he turned, and he walked away, and he headed for the door.

And I rushed after him, with the diagrams, I said, “Look! You see these six little diagrams here, we can—”

But he was gone. And I began to worry whether or not his gift was rescindable. I could feel my grasp of my mind slipping away . . . it was not fully returned since, frankly, which will in some way account for some of what I am going to say to you today.

You are writers, or would-be writers. I would remind you first of this: I do know that in some cities, there is a shortage of taxicabs. And in some cities in America there is a shortage of men’s rooms; this is probably true of women’s rooms, too, but I don’t notice that shortage. I can think of

numerous things of which there is a shortage. Of writers, there is no shortage. I do not hear people going around in the streets, saying, “You know what we need in this country’s more writers!”

I would consider that before you embark on a career, or before you continue on, and then I would consider some of the following things. We have the strange notion that the work of the mind takes place in problem solving, this is a notion that has been given to us by the schools, there’s nothing we can do about that, although if we were a more violent people there would be something we could do about the schools, but we have the notion; and we have a strange notion as to what intelligence is. If the Mensans are the most intelligent people in the nation, we’re in a lot of trouble.

I would like to see a Mensan test which has these questions on it:

- 1) “How would you suggest that it is better to suffer an injustice than to do one?”
- 2) “What line of reasoning would you use to demonstrate that there must be some difference between what we know and what we believe?”
- 3) “How does one test the proposition that there is some difference between what we know and what we believe?”

I would like to see Mensans handle questions like that. I would like to see anybody and everybody handle questions like that; but the fact is, nobody can handle questions like that except writers. No one. I know, you probably do too, that Aristotle discouraged writing. I think he went further—he forbade it among his students. Writing, for him, was just a crutch. I myself do believe that he wanted to monopolize the books, and so be the only writer. There’s a lot in what he says; it’s not good advice for you and me. Never—never take advice from geniuses, never. For them it may be good, for us it doesn’t count, so don’t take Aristotle’s advice, but there’s an interesting reason for his having said that. Aristotle would like us to know the difference between knowing and believing, and Aristotle would like us to consider whether he who does the injustice is happier than he who suffers it, as it so often seems, and this can be done only in discourse. No scribbling in the margins will help

you, no equations, no truth tables; nothing of the sort with which you answer questions on an intelligence test will help you in this matter. The only thing that will help you is connected discourse of a certain nature, and that nature is what makes writing so very painful. You must be truthful.

One of the things I have gathered from the people I have heard today—and I've heard a number of them—although perhaps none of them said it right out, I think everybody was saying it in one way or another, that is, that the one thing a writer must do, is tell the truth. Now, the truth is different from the fact. The truth is not the same as the history: but the Truth. And those of you who have ever found yourselves in the position of having to tell the truth—HAVING to tell the truth—being driven, at last, to tell truth—you know that it is not pleasant.

This business, though, of mind is really first with itself. The business of mind is not with problems, but with something that has no name, for us. If we imagine that life is a problem, if we imagine that such things as war, and poverty, and hatred, which press on us rather heavily (but no more heavily in these days than in any others, really), if we imagine that these things are problems like train questions, which can be worked out if only we find the formula, we imagine a vain thing, and I want to try briefly to suggest the difference between one kind of thinking and another.

When you solve a train problem, you are walking where somebody else has walked before. Now this is true whether or not anybody else has ever solved the train problem. That is to say, between the question of the train problem, and the answer of the train problem, there lies—whether we have found it or not—there lies an absolutely real path of logic. It is there. Otherwise this wouldn't be a problem, you couldn't put it on a test. So when you solve the train problem, or any problem, you walk the path that is there and the only path that is there, except in the case of binomial equations, in which you walk one of two paths, both of them being the only two paths that are there.

That's not the gift that Prometheus gave us. He gave us the mind's power to grasp itself. Not to solve problems, but to reach understanding. And when you go in search of understanding—and if

you are a writer who does anything except go in search of understanding, then we really don't need you, you're part—you are a problem—when we go in search of understanding, we go not on a path, beaten out for us, unless we are parrots, but we go out of the known, and into the unknown. We embark on a perilous voyage, a perilous voyage because anyone who takes this path seriously, and looks for truth in his writing, will discover several things—I can tick some of them off very easily, because I discover them all the time.

1) I have been wrong. All my life, obstinately, stubbornly, and utterly thoughtlessly, I have been wrong.

2) I have lied. That's much worse than being wrong. I have said again and again, as though I knew it and thought it, that which was simply a distortion of a truth that I really did know, and I didn't find this out until I had written myself to this point. It's no fun.

3) Let me put these together. I have been a parrot. I have said in my mind and on my page—what the world has said to me, what my parents have said to me, what my teachers or my bosses have said to me, without even thinking about it.

4) I have been a whore. This is the most likely event, by the way: to find what a whore you are. I have been saying that which I knew would please. Remember what whoring is—you young people especially, you're all obsessed with sex, you think everything is about sex—whoring has very little to do with sex, sexual whoring is a minor and trivial business, it's hardly worth talking about [laughter]—no, remember what Plato, or how Socrates understood whoring: What is whoring? Whoring is to provide to others pleasure without any principle, by which to understand whether or not pleasure and goodness are the same, and whether or not they should have this pleasure. That's whoring. And I find again and again what a whore I have been. Why did I say this before? Well, so that people would like me! Or so that people would hear something that would make them feel good, and because I'm the one who made them feel good then they would give me ... well, whatever it is that they give writers; frankly, I don't know what that is.

5) That I have been ignorant of myself. Now, I am talking here of course of the kind of writing that I do. I don't write fiction, I don't know how

to write fiction; I don't make characters, I don't know how to make characters; I don't have plots, I don't know how to make plots—all I do is try to think on the page—but I have read numbers of the works of those who makes plots, and write fiction, and know how to do that, and there is no difference. There is no difference there whatsoever. They make, insofar as they can, the truth. They make true human beings, who in true human predicaments, seek the truth for themselves. They make there all of the agony and joy, both, that it is to be a human being, coming into self-knowledge or suffering in its lack. As a matter of fact they make it far better than any discursive writer—like this one—can do, and they make it in drama, and they make it in lit, and they make it in living before our eyes, and it is the search for truth ... and whether or not you know, the difference between a good book and a bad book, I don't know—and I don't know the difference between a good book and a bad book—but you do know the difference between a true book and a false book. That is the real distinction. And if you will think about it a false book is whoring, or a false book is parroting; or a false book is a book in which the author—I loved what you said about this this morning, Jane—you write for yourself. And it goes further: I think you write because of yourself. It is you who are illuminated by what you write; and what is the nature of that illumination? It has one simple name—although the terms underneath the name are numerous and complicated—and that is self-knowledge.

We live in a time when writing—writing has become too common, too widespread among us. I expect any day to meet a man at a cocktail party and ask him what he does and he says, “I'm a writer,” and I ask him, “Oh, what have you written?” and he answers, “Close cover before striking.”

Or “HOT.” “HOT.” I know the man who wrote “HOT,” I wonder if he's the same man who wrote “COLD.” Or a man who takes his brushes and paints on a door, “MEN.” A writer? Yes! We have people who write in manuals, people who write instructions, people who write speeches for other people to deliver, people who write wheedling, conniving invitations to us to spend money for one thing or another—people who write their initials on the oak tree, I suppose. We have to start understanding this business of “writer.”

You remember Graham Greene's novel *A Burnt-Out Case*? That was about a novelist who had run out his string, and I think it was Cromelin who wrote a spoof of it in *The New Yorker* called “A Burnt-Out Ace,” and that was about a man who went around to cocktail parties brooding, and introducing himself as a disappointed writer, and it turned out he was a sky-writer; he wrote “Pepsi-Cola” as one of his very, uh, great works.

Now, I am confronted by millions and millions of students; I'm sure there aren't millions, but by God they look that way to me—they are numerous—and ever so many of them, I am told, are supposed to learn to write. Now I don't teach writing, and I don't know how to do that, and I'm rather suspicious of those who do it because I'm not sure it can be done. And I'm beginning to ask myself, Why? Why? Why are we teaching these people to write? Why would they want to write? When will they write? And when we teach them to write, we teach them about prepositions, and about split infinitives, and participles and things like that, and I wonder why. I know it pleases English teachers to get these things right, but we do not teach them the only legitimate reason, the only reason for writing that Prometheus would understand —

“Listen: I have given you not only your minds, but the power to take hold of that mind, and form it for yourself, not just take it as the world of suggestion and influence and environment makes it for you, but to take it, to make it, to make of it your own mind and not another mind, and to do this as thoroughly and as truthfully as possible.” Now as it happens, this is where I think Aristotle is wrong. I cannot sit around and do that in my head, because as soon as I let my head go, it runs to Sissy Spacek or someplace like that.

I don't know what it is about that girl, she has some power over me. I don't know, I hope she doesn't hear about this . . .

And so, I must do this: I must put before me the page, and write. And there stands what I have said, and it is a rebuke. And it must be a rebuke. It says, “Well, what now?” Or it says, “Seems to me it was different yesterday.” Or it asks, “What does that word, in fact, mean?” And then, the next sentence is a response to its rebuke. And also a new rebuke.

Now, as I say, I know nothing of the writing of fiction, but I am certain that those who write it,

know this—“You’re making a character? Oh, talk about hubris. We do it all the time, though. You’re making a character? You’re making a human being? Do you have any idea what goes into that? Do you have any idea of the depths of a human being? Look to your work, writer! Look here for truth! And forget about accuracy for a while, too. Let that come later.”—so that to them, every sentence is a rebuke.

And so it must be. Now, if you take up writing seriously, I can’t promise this, but I can hope this: I hope that it will make you profoundly unhappy. I hope that every day will bring you some bad news from the frontier of that unknown territory in which you work. I hope every day you rise up from your desk and say, “God, what a fool I was yesterday!” So that you can say that again tomorrow. And thus write against your life.

There was a very popular whoring book around lately—I don’t know, it hasn’t been for some time, I can’t remember when, it was called “I’m Okay”—uh, something—“I’m Okay, You’re Okay.” Oh, what pleasant news. Believe me, you’ll never lose money by telling people how nice they are. You’ll never lose money by telling people, “Hey! Don’t worry about your miserable rotten behavior and your perversions, and your lies, and your thefts! You’re okay!” No one will blame you for this, and you may actually do quite well. I don’t know about you—I suspect, but I don’t know about you—however I will tell you this: I am not okay. I am not okay. I do not carefully define my terms when I think. I do not test, rigidly, as though I were a stranger, every one of my quaint and curious notions, prejudices, and beliefs, I do not do this, I am not okay. I lie. Whether I lie to you is none of your damn business; I lie to me, as to what I am and how it is in me. And I am not okay. (And I don’t think you’re okay either, but all I can do is suspect that.)

Okayness does not ever come; I’m sure of that. But writing is the path towards it, and it’s a path that hurts.

The main point of the gift of Prometheus, I think, is this. He made of us, with that gift—by the way I’m a literal fundamentalist where the myth of Prometheus is concerned, you’ll understand—but by that gift, he made us absolutely unique in the universe, as far as we know. Before, all blindly floundering on, which is roughly as Aeschylus puts it, we were like the

zebras, or the gnus (it’s always good to mention the gnus): When bumped from the left, we veered to the right. And when bumped from the right, we veered to the left. We responded, perhaps very successfully as the zebras and the gnus do, matter of fact; but in a sense we lived what I think of as a satellite life. We lived, really, like moons. The moon ... shines. But not of herself. The moon is beautiful, but her beauty is provided for us by another power, the sun. The sun ... the sun does the sun. We do not see the sun by reflected light, we see the sun by its own light, and the day after Prometheus gave us that gift we who were satellites, creatures like others, entirely—flowing—where influence came, we became a new creature, something entirely different, all of us. You, you, you did. From having been a moon, you became a sun. The energy is in you. It starts in here. It has its home, its dwelling place, in here. Not in the world. Not in society. Not in your family. Not in your political party. Not in your church—here is the life, and here is the light. Who of us knows that light? And who of us knows much about it? Damn few.

Any serious work that a human being does must be looking for this light. And if you don’t find this light, you will be able to write, and to be a writer—either as a parrot or a whore, of course. But you’ll never find the truth. Perhaps you’ll never miss it, as a matter of fact I think the worst of them don’t. But you will miss it. Because I am telling you this. I am a very arrogant schoolteacher; when people sit before me as though they are students, I imagine that they want to hear what I have to say and so I tell them what I have to say, and I tell them that because I have told you this, now you must be different, or deliberately reject some light. Go ahead and do that, if you will. But if you do pursue it, if you take this step from unknowing into knowing, you do walk a dangerous, perhaps even a deadly path; but it’s the only path. I encourage no one to do this. But those of you who do it, and will do it, I will tell you this—and I will tell you this as a command, because you can walk out now before you hear this command, but I’m going to give you this command:

Don’t—shine.

Don’t seek to shine.

Burn.

# Why Good Grammar?

by Richard Mitchell

I HAVE been given this assignment: To write on the question, Why good grammar? I have not been explicitly asked to answer the question, however, and for that I am grateful. It is a strange question, after all, something like Why clean hands? And its best answer is really, Well, why not? If there is anything to be proved here, it ought to be left to those who support the cause of “bad grammar.”

The fact that a collection of English teachers can put that question forth as worthy of serious consideration is far more interesting than the question itself, for it suggests that we need desperately to defend the continuance of an enterprise in which we have regularly failed to bring about any noticeable public devotion to what we call “good grammar.” And it conjures up a disquieting image of a colloquium of mining engineers which devotes one of its afternoon sessions to considering the topic: Why would English teachers sit around asking themselves “Why Good Grammar?” Surely they would find more fascination in that question than in “Why Good Arithmetic?”

Behind the current murmuring about the teaching of grammar, and the supposedly related teaching of writing, there seems to be a strange, but not at all unaccountable, misunderstanding. When I hear the plans and pleas of the curriculum coordinators and the language arts facilitators, I get the impression, which I am sure they intend to convey, and which they may actually believe a correct one, that the grammar of the English language is inordinately difficult to learn. They have such elaborate (and expensive) plans for the teaching of it, that one might think them engaged in training a whole nation of children as master architects or violin virtuosi. But the learning of grammar is not a difficult and improbable achievement. In fact, there is some sense in pointing out that no one really needs to learn it.

While I often do claim, out of exasperation, to have students who have no native tongue at all, the simple truth is that there is no person on the face of the earth who doesn't know the grammar of his language, for who doesn't would have no language at all. He would be unable to utter anything that we would recognize. Grammar is a strange and as yet unfathomable power to utter, and without any deliberate thought at all, any sentence or any infinite number of possible sentences.

But that power, of course, is not what the projectors of comprehensive nation-wide intercurricular grammatical renovation have in mind. They must be thinking about things like misplaced modifiers and “between she and I,” and even of pronoun agreement and the difference between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses. And I think they may be wasting their time, and lots of money, some part of which is mine.

Even the “grammar” of conventional rules and regulations is not, in our language, either a large body of information or a particularly difficult one to learn. While serious meditation on the difference between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses will lead to important insights about the philosophy of meaning, the student who would simply like to recognize which is which needs neither the meditation nor the insights. And the same is true of the agreement of subject and verb and the sequence of the tenses, and true, as well, of all those things that so many students seem never to have heard of, after having heard of them over and over again for twenty long years. We ought to be asking ourselves not whether we should persist in the teaching of “good grammar,” and seeking, as it must often seem to the rest of the world, some excuse to abandon the whole futile enterprise, but why it is that we can't seem to teach such a small body of principles so easy to grasp.

I have encountered (who hasn't?) governors and college presidents and deans and even guidance counselors, not to mention a few English teachers, who can not consistently make their pronouns agree with their antecedents or punctuate non-restrictive clauses. Their defense of such lapses is an interesting one; on the one hand it has some merit, but only if we grant the implicit assumption that “language is communication,” which we ought to be careful not to do. On the other hand, it

is an inadvertent self-condemnation, admitting to a lapse somewhat more serious than an ill-chosen pronoun. They say, “Well, you knew what I meant, didn’t you?” And I did. But I also know where they had been, or, to put it more accurately, where they hadn’t been.

In any mouth or pen, grammatical habits, especially those more important to writing than to speech, present a miniature character sketch or autobiography. Many of the attributes therein revealed are personal, and some collective, social, or even ethnic, and, strictly speaking, none of a teacher’s business, and that is so whether the unwitting autobiographer is the student I am supposed to teach or the academic vice-president who is supposed to be more academic than I. Most of those little gaucheries and solecisms that make us think that we ought to teach more grammar are only the habits of a mind in a certain condition, a condition to whose cure all of us have supposedly chosen to devote our lives.

I know of no specific name for the condition I have in mind, and I find it hard to describe. Although it is a kind of thoughtlessness, or unknowing, it is not truly what we usually mean by ignorance—the simple lack of information. Nor is it dullness of mind, or stupidity, whatever we might mean by that. It is that condition in which the mind takes but little, or takes but rarely, the grasp of itself. Although it isn’t necessarily caused, or perpetuated by a lack of reading, or cured, either, by a glut of reading, it is nevertheless the condition to which we seem vaguely to point when we sit around and complain that our students seem never to have read anything.

While I would not want to make a habit of it, I will for now call that condition “inducation,” the state of being led into something, rather than out of it, as “education” suggests. But even that idea is not quite enough, for the condition I have in mind is not accurately described as one into which we are led, but one in which we are left, and out of which we might be led. In its purest form, it is the condition in which the mind operates like an organ of the senses, thinking what it must think in response to the suggestions of its environment, as the ear hears whatever it can hear and the open eye must see whatever lies before it.

As Holmes often remarked to Watson, it is not at all uncommon for the eye to see without

noticing, and when the mind works like an organ of the senses, it is to be expected that it will do the same, which can perhaps be described as thinking without thinking about, without considering, reflecting, comparing, weighing, or judging. It is the condition in which the mind serves as a registry, a perpetual catalog of whatever presents itself. That condition is not only one in which we are born, but one into which we fall continually, and into which, it must be admitted, we had better fall in the ordinary course of daily life, lest we find ourselves walking into closed doors and driving our cars on the other side of the road.

Consider now the opposite condition, the one in which the mind, still the hapless receiver of the world about it, can nevertheless withdraw far enough so that it can, and will, consider, reflect, compare, weigh, and judge—comment, as it were, on the items in its register. How are those acts performed? What evidence have we, and what evidence can we provide, either of their existence or their conclusions? The form in which they exist, and the only form in which they can exist, is language, nothing but language. They are acts of language, which are to the mind what motion is to the body.

One who considers is in fact talking in himself and with himself, and one who does not consider but receives only is reciting what is really a kind of list, a list of the names of the items that appear in the world. To that list he may well add the names of items associated with those presently visible, but the act of the mind that he does not commit is the act we call, in what is truly a grammatical distinction, “predication.” And thus for the reciter, any kind of language will do, for the outer reality that it names is what it is no matter what the reciter calls it, and that he calls it something in its presence is sufficient. For the considerer, the outer reality engenders a statement that is not the reality itself, but a statement about it, a predication. And that statement brings forth statements about the statement.

There is another way to understand the reciter’s condition: in his case, language really is communication. His inward words correspond to the world outside, whether accurately or not, it doesn’t matter. It is he alone who needs to be satisfied with the correspondence. And should he, someday, find himself not satisfied and impelled to be satisfied, he will have to move to another

floor of the mind, as it were, and make statements about his statements. Then, grammar will become important to him, although he is very unlikely to say, “Aha! I now see that grammar is important.”

An example: as a child in school, I was not baffled by subordinating conjunctions, but that was only because I was totally indifferent to subordinating conjunctions. I knew what the book said about them, and I could answer the teacher’s questions about them in the terms of the book, and that was all I needed to do. It satisfied the teacher. But to be baffled, one must be interested, and to be interested in subordinating conjunctions, a condition that seems especially dismal but, fortunately, remarkably unlikely, requires first an interest in subordination itself.

But an interest in subordination is not unlikely, not, at least, in a mind that has discovered certain of its powers. Subordination is the root of logic, which is itself a grammatical art, the consideration of the just relation of one statement to another, and logical fallacies are errors of grammar—a confusion, for example, as to whether two statements can be related as “if” implies or as “because” implies. Some minds, at some point, discover that they can not make sense of their own predications without attention to grammar, although they do not ordinarily think of what they are doing as an exercise in grammar.

If they don’t, that is our fault. We teach grammar, depending on our factions, either as a ticket of admission to “culture,” or a marketable skill serving to provide industry with plenty of communicators. Some of us would rather not teach it at all, seeing in it just another penchant of the “dominant class.” And in almost all cases, we are vainly trying to teach it as what it is not, a catalog of rules and regulations, to the wrong people at the wrong time, to unawakened children, of many ages, whose minds have not begun to want any grasp of themselves. For them, and their registers, communication is enough, and they are, for their own purposes, quite right in saying, just as all those unawakened deans and presidents and guidance counselors say, “Well, you knew what I meant, didn’t you?”

And, just like the deans, and presidents, and guidance counselors, the children in our classes are as they are because their minds have not yet wandered or lingered in the right place, in that place where the mind does its most important

work through the consideration and manipulation of language. Thus it is that even the most elementary facts of English grammar seem to them arbitrary. It is for the sake of the work of the mind that a pronoun “agrees” with its antecedent, however far away; it echoes and reasserts one relationship of ideas rather than another. But for him for whom the naming of ideas is enough, that curious “agreement” seems finicky, a strange notion of schoolteachers, and an unnecessary complication of a very simple and straightforward process—communication.

We are at least partly right when we sense that students, just like the deans and presidents and guidance counselors, seem never to have read anything. That isn’t true, of course, they have read a lot, but they are in the habit of reading (in both cases) texts carefully chosen not to disrupt the mind as a sense organ. Ambiguity, irony, and wit, to say nothing of deliberate pondering and metaphoric analogy, are not common either in the texts exchanged by managers or in those by which children are taught to “read.” For it is not truly reading that they are taught; it is the receiving of communication. We do this in the strange belief that they ought not to have to suffer perplexity, but it is only as the mind notices its perplexity, and suffers—for the noticing is not by itself enough—that it begins to move from recitation to consideration, to taking some grasp of itself.

We have formed the habit of teaching “good grammar” as though it were a prerequisite for other powers, especially for good writing and clear thinking. In fact, though, those powers are really one—the power of the mind to consider itself and its own works. Writers do not write grammar any more than readers read grammar. Both, unless they are mere reciters and receivers of communications, do the work of the mind in grammar, for that work can be done in no other medium. And the knowledge and understanding of the rules and conventions of grammar come most readily to one whose mind is already using them. Before we can bring our students to remember, and enforce upon themselves, those rules and conventions, we will have to bring them to need them, and to know that they need them.

“Good grammar,” in the fullest sense of the term, is neither an embellishment nor an accessory to anything else. It is the Law by which meaning is found and made. It may be, of course, that a

good “education” ought to provide something more, but it is preposterous, perhaps even wicked, to suggest that it can be had with anything less.



# The First Great Booklet

Vexatious Readings  
from

Thucydides  
Joseph Conrad  
Ben Jonson  
Michel de Montaigne  
Plato  
Ludwig Wittgenstein  
John Woolman  
Edward Bellamy  
Anthony Trollope

## A Leaflet For The Masses

FROM  
THE UNDERGROUND TRACTARIAN SOCIETY



Thucydides Considers

### The Innermost Consequences of War

SO bloody was the march of the revolution, and the impression which it made was the greater as it was one of the first to occur. Later on, one may say, the whole Hellenic world was convulsed; struggles being made everywhere by the popular chiefs to bring in the Athenians, and by the oligarchs to introduce the Lacedaemonians. In peace there would have been neither the pretext nor the wish to make such an invitation; but in war, with an alliance always at the command of either faction for the hurt of their adversaries and their own corresponding advantage, opportunities for bringing in the foreigner were never wanting to the revolutionary parties.

The sufferings which the revolution entailed upon the cities were many and terrible, such as

have occurred and always will occur, as long as the nature of mankind remains the same; though in a severer or milder form, and varying in their symptoms, according to the variety of the particular cases. In peace and prosperity states and individuals have better sentiments, because they do not find themselves suddenly confronted with imperious necessities; but war takes away the easy supply of daily wants, and so proves a rough master, that brings most men’s characters to a level with their fortunes.

Revolution thus ran its course from city to city, and the places which it arrived at last, from having heard what had been done before, carried to a still greater excess the refinement of their inventions, as manifested in the cunning of their enterprises and the atrocity of their reprisals. Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question inaptness to act on any. Frantic violence became the attribute of manliness; and cautious plotting a justifiable means of self-defence. The advocate of extreme measures was always trustworthy; his opponent a man to be suspected. To succeed in a plot was to have a shrewd head, to divine a plot still shrewder; but to try to provide against having to do either was to break up your party and to be afraid of your adversaries. In fine, to forestall an intending criminal, or to suggest the idea of a crime, was equally commended, until even blood became a weaker tie than party, from the superior readiness of those united by the latter to dare everything without reserve; for such associations had not in view the blessings derivable from established institutions but were formed by ambition for their overthrow; and the confidence of their members in each other rested less on any religious sanction than upon complicity in crime.

The fair proposals of an adversary were met with jealous precautions by the stronger of the two, and not with generous confidence. Revenge was also held of more account than self-preservation. Oaths of reconciliation, being only proffered on either side to meet an immediate difficulty, only held good so long as no other weapon was at hand; but when opportunity offered, he who first ventured to seize it and to

take his enemy off his guard, thought this perfidious vengeance, better than an open one, since, considerations of safety apart, success by treachery won him the palm of superior intelligence. Indeed, it is generally the case that men are readier to call rogues clever than simpletons honest, and are as ashamed of being the second as they are proud of being the first.

The cause of all these evils was the lust for power arising from greed and ambition; and from these passions proceeded the violence of parties once engaged in contention. The leaders in the cities, each provided with the fairest professions, on the one side with the cry of political equality of the people, on the other of a moderate aristocracy, sought prizes for themselves in those public interests which they pretended to cherish, and, recoiling from no means in their struggles for ascendancy, engaged in the direct excesses; in their acts of vengeance they went to even greater lengths, not stopping at what justice or the good of the state demanded, but making the party caprice of the moment their only standard, and invoking with equal readiness the condemnation of an unjust verdict or the authority of the strong arm to glut the animosities of the hour. Thus religion was in honour with neither party; but the use of fair phrases to arrive at guilty ends was in high reputation. Meanwhile the moderate part of the citizens perished between the two, either for not joining in the quarrel, or because envy would not suffer them to escape.

Thus every form of iniquity took root in the Hellenic countries by reason of the troubles. The ancient simplicity into which honour so largely entered was laughed down and disappeared; and society became divided into camps in which no man trusted his fellow. To put an end to this, there was neither promise to be depended upon, nor oath that could command respect; but all parties dwelling rather in their calculation upon the hopelessness of a permanent state of things, were more intent upon self-defence than capable of confidence. In this contest the blunter wits were most successful. Apprehensive of their own deficiencies and of the cleverness of their antagonists, they feared to be worsted in debate and to be surprised by the combinations of their more versatile opponents, and so at once boldly had recourse to action; while their adversaries, arrogantly thinking that they should know in time,

and that it was unnecessary to secure by action what policy afforded, often fell victims to their want of precaution.

**A Social Comment**  
from  
**The Nigger of the Narcissus**  
by  
Joseph Conrad

ANOTHER new hand—a man with shifty eyes and a yellow hatchet face, who had been listening openmouthed in the shadow of the midship locker—observed in a squeaky voice: —“Well, it’s a ’omeward trip anyhow. Bad or good, I can do it on my ’ed—s’long as I get ’ome. And I can look after my rights! I will show ’em!”

All the heads turned towards him. Only the ordinary seaman and the cat took no notice. He stood with arms akimbo, a little fellow with white eyelashes. He looked as if he had known all the degradations and all the furies. He looked as if he had been cuffed, kicked, rotted in the mud; he looked as if he has been scratched, spat upon, petted with unmentionable filth, and he smiled with a sense of security at the faces around. His ears were bending down under the weight of his battered felt hat. The torn tails of his black coat flapped in fringes about the calves of his legs. He unbuttoned the only two buttons that remained and everyone saw that he had no shirt under it. It was his deserved misfortune that those rags which nobody could possibly have supposed to own looked on him as though they had been stolen. His neck was long and thin; his eyelids were red; rare hairs hung about his jaws; his shoulders were peaked and drooped like the broken wings of a bird; all his left side was caked with mud which showed that he had lately slept in a wet ditch.

He had saved his inefficient carcass from violent destruction by running away from an American ship where, in a moment of forgetful folly, he had dared to engage himself; and he had knocked about for a fortnight ashore in the native quarter, cadging for drinks, starving, sleeping on rubbish-heaps, wandering in sunshine: a startling visitor from the world of nightmares.

He stood repulsive and smiting in the sudden silence. This clean white fore-castle was his refuge; the place where he could be lazy; where

he could wallow, and lie and eat—and curse the food he ate; where he could display his talents for shirking work, for cheating, for cadging; where he could find surely someone to wheedle and someone to bully—and where he would be paid for doing all this.

They all knew him. Is there a spot on earth where such a man is unknown, an ominous survival testifying to the eternal fitness of ties and impudence? A taciturn long-armed shellback, with hooked fingers, who had been lying on his back smoking, turned in his bed to examine him dispassionately, then, over his head, sent a long jet of saliva clear towards the door.

They all knew him! He was the man that cannot steer, that cannot splice, that dodges the work on dark nights; that, aloft, holds on frantically with both arms and legs, and swears at the wind, the sleet, the darkness; the man who curses the sea while others work. The man who is the last out and the first in when all hands are called. The man who can't do most things and won't do the rest. The pet of philanthropists and self-seeking landlubbers. The sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all his rights, but knows nothing of courage, of endurance, and of the unexpressed faith, of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company. The independent offspring of the slums, full of disdain and hate for the austere servitude of the sea.

**Extracts from Timber,  
or, Discoveries Made  
upon Men and Matter**

by  
Ben Jonson

FOR a man to write well, there are required three Necessaries: To reade the best Authors, observe the best Speakers, and much exercise of his own style. In style, to consider what ought to be written and after what manner: Hee must first thinke and excogitate his matter, then choose his words, and examine the weight of either. Then take care, in placing and ranking both matter and words, that the composition be comely; and to do this with diligence and often. No matter how slow the style be at first, so it be labour'd and accurate; seeke the best, and be not glad of the forward concepts, or first words, that offer themselves to

us; but judge of what wee invent, and order what we approve. Repeat often what we have formerly written: which beside that it helps the consequence, and makes the juncture better, it quickens the heate of imagination, that often cools in the time of setting down, and gives it new strength, as if it grew lustier by the going back. As wee see in the contention of leaping, they jump farthest that fetch their race largest; or, as in throwing the Dart or lavelin, we force back our arms to make our loose the stronger. Yet, if we have a fair gate of wind, I forbid not the steering out of our sayle, so the favour of the gale deceive us not. For all that wee invent doth please us in the conception or birth, else we would never set it down. But the safest is to return to our judgement, and handle over again those things the easinesse of which makes them justly suspected. So did the best Writers in their beginnings; they impos'd upon themselves care and industry. They did nothing rashly. They obtain'd first to write well, and then custome made it easie and a habit. So the summe of all is: Ready writing makes not good writing, but good writing brings on ready writing.

THE shame of speaking unskilfully were small if the tongue onely were thereby disgrac'd: But as the Image of a King in his Seale ill-represented is not so much a blemish to the waxe, or the Signet that seat'd it, as to the Prince it representeth, so disordered speech is not so much injury to the lips that give it forth, as to the disproportion and incoherence of things in themselves, so negligently expressed. Neither can his Mind be thought to be in Tune, whose words do jarre; nor his reason in frame, whose sentence is preposterous; nor his Elocution clear and perfect, whose utterance breaks it self into fragments and uncertainties. Negligent speech doth not only discredit the person of the Speaker, but it discrediteth the opinion of his reason and judgement; it discrediteth the force and uniformity of the matter and substance. If it be so then in words, which fly and 'scape censure, and where one good Phrase asks pardon for many incongruities and faults, how then shall he be thought wise whose penning is thin and shallow? How shall you took for wit from him whose leasure and head, assisted with the examination of his eyes, yeeld you no life or sharpnesse in his writing?

BUT Arts and Precepts avail nothing, except nature be beneficial and ayding, and therefore these things are no more written to a dull disposition then rules of husbandry to a barren Soyle. No precepts will profit a Foole, no more then beauty will the blind, or musicke the deaf. As wee should take care that our style in writing be neither dry nor empty, wee should looke againe it be not winding, or wanton with far-fetched descriptions: Either is a vice. But that is worse which proceeds out of want then that which riots out of plenty. The remedy of fruitfulness is easie, but no labour will help the contrary. I will like and praise some things in a young Writer which yet, if hee continue in, I cannot but justly hate him for the same. There is a time to be given all things for maturity, and that even your Countrey-husbandman can teach, who to a young plant will not put the proyning knife, because it seems to feare the iron, as not able to admit the scarre. No more would I tell a greene Writer all his faults, left I should make him grieve and faint, and at last despaire. For nothing doth more hurt then to make him so afraid of all things as hee can endeavor nothing. Therefore youth ought to be instructed betimes, and in the best things; for wee hold those longest wee take soonest: As the first sent of a Vessel lasts, and the tinct the wool first receives. Therefore a Master should temper his own powers, and descend to the others infirmity.

THERE cannot be one colour of the mind, another of the wit. If the mind be staid, grave, and compos'd, the wit is so; that vitiated, the other is blowne and deflower'd. Do wee not see, if the mind languish, the members are dull? Looke upon an effeminate person: his very gate confesseth him. If a man be fiery, his motion is so; if angry, 'tis troubled and violent. So that wee may conclude: Wheresoever manners and fashions are corrupted, Language is. It imitates the publicke riot. The excesse of Feasts and apparell are the notes of a sick State, and the wantonnesse of language, of a sick mind.

(This is, of course, the work from which we have taken the motto of THE UNDEPGROUND GRAMMARIAN, "Neither can his mind..." We sometimes wish that we had chosen instead that last sentence. We may yet do that.)

## An Anti-Social Comment

from

### On Solitarinesse

by

Michel de Montaigne

VERILY, a man of understanding hath lost nothing if he yet have himself. When the city of Nola was overrun by the barbarians, Paulinus, bishop thereof, having lost all he had there and being their prisoner, prayed thus to God: "Oh Lord, deliver me from feeling of this loss; for thou knowest as yet they have touched nothing that is mine." The riches that made him rich and the goods that made him good were yet absolutely whole. Behold what it is to choose treasures well that may be freed from injury, and to hide them in a place where no man may enter and which cannot be betrayed but by ourselves.

In our accustomed actions, of a thousand there is not one found that regards us. He whom thou seest so furiously and, as it were, beside himself to clamber or crawl up the city walls or breach as a point-blank to a whole volley of shot, and another all wounded and scarred, crazed and faint and will-nigh hunger-starven, resolved rather to die than to open his enemy the gate and give him entrance—dost thou think he is there for himself? No, verity, it is peradventure for such a one whom neither he nor many of his fellows ever saw and who haply takes no care at all for them, but is therewithst wallowing up to the ears in sensuality, sloth, and all manner of carnal delights. This man whom, about midnight, when others take their rest, thou seest come out of his study meager-looking, with eyes trilling, phlegmatic, squalid and sprawling—dost thou think that, plodding on his books, he doth seek how he shall become an honest man, or more wise, or more content? There is no such matter. He will either die in his pursuit or teach posterity the measure of Plautus' verses and the true orthography of a Latin word. Who doth not willingly chop and counterchange his health, his ease, yea, and his life, for glory and for reputation, the most unprofitable, vain, and counterfeit coin that is in use with us? Our death is not sufficient to make us afraid, let us also charge ourselves with that of our wives, of our children, and of our friends and people. Our own affairs do not sufficiently vex us; let us also

drudge, toil, vex, and torment ourselves with our neighbors' and friends' matters.

As we have lived long enough for others, live we the remainder of our life unto ourselves. Let us bring home our cogitations and inventions into ourselves and unto our ease. It is no easy matter to make a safe retreat; it doth overmuch trouble us without joining other enterprises to it. Since God gives us leisure to dispose of our dislodging, let us prepare ourselves unto it; pack we up our baggage; let us betimes bid our company farewell; shake we off these violent hold-fasts which elsewhere engage us and estrange us from ourselves. These so strong bonds must be untied, and a man may eftsoons love this or that but wed nothing but himself. That is to say, let the rest be our own, yet not so combined and glued together that it may not be sundered without flaying us and therewithal pull away some piece of our own. The greatest thing of the world is for a man to know how to be his own.

### **Socrates on Navigation**

from  
**Georgias**  
by  
Plato

SOCRATES: Do you imagine that one should bend his efforts to living as long as possible and practice those arts that constantly save us from dangers, such as the rhetoric you bid me practice, which preserves one's life in the law courts?

CALLICLES: Yes, by heaven, and it was good advice, too.

SOCRATES: What now, my good friend, Do you consider the art of swimming something particularly wonderful?

CALLICLES: No indeed, not I.

SOCRATES: And yet even that art saves men from death whenever they fall into some situation where such knowledge is needed. But if this seems to you insignificant, I can tell you of one greater than this, the pilot's art which like rhetoric, saves not only our lives but also our bodies and our goods from the gravest dangers. And this art is unpretentious and orderly, and does not put on airs or make believe that its accomplishments are astonishing. But, in return for the same results as those achieved by the advocate, if it brings you here safely from Aegina,

it asks but two obols, and if from Egypt or the Black Sea, for this mighty service of bringing home safely all that I mentioned just now, oneself and children and goods and womenfolk and disembarking them in the harbor, it asks two drachmas at the most, and the man who possesses this art and achieves these results goes ashore and walks alongside his ship with modest bearing. For I suppose he is capable of reflecting that it is uncertain which of his passengers he has benefited and which he has harmed by not suffering them to be drowned, knowing as he does that those he has landed are in no way better than when they embarked, either in body or in soul. He knows that if anyone afflicted in the body with serious and incurable diseases has escaped drowning the man is wretched for not having died and has received no benefit from him; he must therefore reckon that if any man suffers from many incurable diseases in the soul, which is so much more precious than the body, for such a man life is not worthwhile and it will be no benefit to him if he, the pilot, saves him from the sea or from the law court or from any other risk. For he knows it is not better for an evil man to live, for he needs must live ill.

This is why the pilot is not accustomed to give himself airs, even though he saves us; no my strange friend, nor the engineer either, who at times has no less power to save life than the general or anyone else, not to mention the pilot, for at times he preserves entire cities. Do you place him in the same class as the advocate? And yet, if he were inclined to speak as you people do, Callicles, making much of his services, he would bury us with the weight of his arguments, urging and exhorting us on the necessity of becoming engineers, since all other professions are valueless, for he can make a good case for himself. But you disdain him and his craft nonetheless, and would call him "engineer" as a term of reproach, and you would never be willing to give your daughter to his son or take his daughter yourself. And yet if we took at the reasons for which you praise your own accomplishments, what just cause have you for disdaining the engineer and the others I have mentioned just now? I know you would say you are a better man and of better family. But if by "better" you do not mean what I do, but goodness consists merely in saving oneself and one's

property, whatever one's character, it is ridiculous to find fault with the engineer and the doctor and the other crafts devised for the purpose of giving safety. But, my good sir, just reflect whether what is good and noble is not something more than saving and being saved. Perhaps the true man should ignore this question of living for a certain span of years and being so enamored of life, but should leave these things to God and, trusting the womenfolk who say that no man can escape his destiny, should consider the ensuing question—in what way one can best live the life that is to be his, whether by assimilating himself to the type of government under which he lives—so that now, after all, you must become as like as possible to the Athenian people, if you are to be dear to them and wield great power in the city.

**Looking for the World**  
from  
**Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus**  
by  
Ludwig Wittgenstein

NEWTONIAN mechanics, for example, imposes a unified form on the description of the world. Let us imagine a white surface with irregular blank spots on it. We then say that whatever kind of picture these make, I can always approximate it as closely as I wish by covering the surface with a sufficiently fine square mesh, and then saying of every square whether it is black or white. In this way I shall have imposed a unified form on the description of the surface. The form is optional, since I could have achieved the same result by using a net with a triangular or hexagonal mesh. Possibly the use of a triangular mesh would have made the description simpler: that is to say, it might be that we could describe the surface more accurately with a coarse triangular mesh than with a fine square mesh (or conversely), and so on. The different nets correspond to different systems for describing the world. Mechanics determines one form of description of the world by saying that all propositions used must be obtained in a given way from a given set of propositions—the axioms of mechanics. It thus supplies the bricks for building the edifice of science, and it says, “Any building that you want to erect, whatever it may be, must somehow be constructed with these bricks, and with these alone.”

(Just as with the number system we must be able to write down any number we wish, so with the system of mechanics we must be able to write down any proposition of physics that we wish.)

And now we can see the relative position of logic and mechanics. (The net might consist of more than one kind of mesh: e. g. we could use both triangles and hexagons.) The possibility of describing a picture like the one mentioned above with a net of given forms tells us nothing about the picture. (For that is true of all such pictures.) But what does characterize the picture is that it can be described completely by a particular net with a particular size of mesh.

Similarly, the possibility of describing the world by means of Newtonian mechanics tells us nothing about the world: but what does tell us something about it is the precise way in which it is possible to describe it by these means. We are also told something about the world by the fact that it can be described more simply with one system of mechanics than with another.

**The Bottomest of Bottom-Lines**  
from  
**The Diary of John Woolman**

UNTIL the year 1756, I continued to retail goods, besides following my trade as a Taylor; about which time I grew uneasy on account of my business growing too cumbersome. I began with selling timings for garments, and from thence proceeded to Sell cloaths and linens, and at length having got a considerable shop of goods, my trade increased every year, and the road to large business appeared open: but I felt a Stop in my mind.

Through the Mercies of the Almighty I had in a good degree learned to be content with a plain way of living. I had but a small family and my outward Affairs had been prosperous and, on serious reflection I believed Truth did not require me to engage in much cumbering affairs. It had generally been my practice to buy and sell things really usefull. Things that served chiefly to please the vain mind in people, I was not easie to trade in; seldom did it, and whenever I did, I found it weaken me as a Christian.

The increase of business became my burthen, for though my natural inclination was towards merchandize, yet I believed Truth required me to

live more free from outward cumpers. There was now a strife in my mind betwixt the two, and in this exercise my prayers were put up to the Lord, who Graciously heard me, and gave me a heart resigned to his Holy will; I then lessened my outward business; and as I had opportunity told my customers of my intention that they might consider what shop to turn to: and so in a while, wholly laid down merchandize, following my trade as a Taylor, myself only, having no prentice. I also had a nursery of Apple trees, in which I spent a good deal of time, howing, grafting, trimming & Inoculating.

In merchandize it is the custom where I lived, to sell chiefly on credit; and poor people often get in debt, & when payment is expected having not wherewith to pay, & so their creditors sue for it Law: Having often observed occurences of this kind, I found it good for me to advise poor people to take such as were most useful & not costly.

### **Some Modest Proposals**

from

### **Looking Backward**

by

Edward Bellamy

“**AFTERALL,**” I remarked, “no amount of education can cure natural dullness or make up for original mental deficiencies. Unless the average mental capacity of men is much above its level in my day, a high education must be pretty nearly thrown away on a large element of the population. We used to hold that a certain amount of susceptibility to educational influences is required to make a mind worth cultivating, just as a certain natural fertility in the soil is required if it is to repay tilling.”

“Ah,” said Dr. Leete, “I am glad you used that illustration, for it is just the one I would have chosen to set forth the modern view of education. You say that land so poor that the product will not repay the labor of tilling is not cultivated. Nevertheless, much land that does not begin to repay tilling was cultivated in your day and is in ours. I refer to gardens, parks, lawns, and, in general, to pieces of land so situated that, were they left to grow up to weeds and briers, they would be eyesores and inconveniences to all about. They are therefore tilled, and though their product is little, there is yet no land that, in a

wider sense, better repays cultivation. So it is with the men and women with whom we mingle in the relations of society, whose voices are always in our ears, whose behavior in innumerable ways affects our enjoyment—who are, in fact, as much conditions of our lives as the air we breathe, or any of the physical elements on which we depend. If, indeed, we could not afford to educate everybody, we should choose the coarsest and dullest by nature, rather than the brightest, to receive what education we could give. The naturally refined and intellectual can better dispense with aids to culture than those less fortunate in endowments.

“To borrow a phrase used in your day, we should not consider life worth living if we had to be surrounded by a population of ignorant, boorish, coarse, wholly uncultivated men and women, as was the plight of the few educated in your day. Is a man satisfied, merely because he is perfumed himself, to mingle with a malodorous crowd? Could he take more than a very limited satisfaction, even in a palatial apartment, if the windows on all sides opened into stable yards? And yet just that was the situation of those considered most fortunate as to culture and refinement in your day.... The cultured man in your day was like one up to the neck in a nauseous bog solacing himself with a smelling bottle. You see, perhaps, now, how we look at this question of universal high education. No single thing is so important to every man as to have for neighbors intelligent, companionable persons. There is nothing, therefore, which the nation can do for him, that will enhance so much his own happiness as to educate his neighbors. When it fails to do so, the value of his own education is reduced by half, and many of the tastes he has cultivated are made positive sources of pain.

“To educate some to the highest degree, and leave the mass wholly uncultivated, as you did, made the gap between them almost like that between different species, which have no means of communication. What could be more inhuman than this consequence of a partial enjoyment of education! Its universal and equal enjoyment leaves the differences between men as to natural endowments as marked as in the state of nature, but the level of lowest is vastly raised. Brutishness is eliminated. All have some inklings of the humanities, some appreciation of the things of the

mind, and an admiration for the still higher culture they have fallen short of. They have become capable of receiving and imparting, all in some measure, the pleasures and inspirations of a refined social life. The cultured society of the nineteenth century—what did it consist of but here and there a few microscopic oases in a vast, unbroken wilderness? The proportion of individuals capable of intellectual sympathies or refined intercourse used to be so infinitesimal as to be in any broad view of humanity scarcely worth mentioning. One generation of the world today represents a greater volume of intellectual life than any five centuries ever did before.

“There is still another point I should mention in stating the grounds on which nothing less than the universality of the best education could now be tolerated,” continued Dr. Leete, “and that is, the interest of the coming generation in having educated parents. To put the matter in a nutshell, there are three main grounds on which our educational system rests: first, the right of every man to the completest education the nation can give him on his own account, as necessary to the enjoyment of himself; second, the right of his fellow citizens to have him educated, as necessary to their enjoyment of his society; third, the right of the unborn to be guaranteed an intelligent and refined parentage.”

**The Last Word**

from

**Orley Farm**

by Anthony Trollope

THERE is nothing perhaps so generally consoling to a man as a well-established grievance; a feeling of having been injured, on which his mind can brood from hour to hour, allowing him to plead his own cause in his own court, within his own heart,—and always to plead it successfully.

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# The Second Great Booklet

Vexatious Readings  
from  
Various Minds

## A Leaflet For The Masses

FROM  
THE UNDERGROUND TRACTARIAN SOCIETY



FROM the external and visible world there comes an old adage: “Only the one who works gets bread.” Oddly enough, the adage does not fit the world in which it is most at home, for imperfection is the fundamental law of the external world, and here it happens again and again that he who does not work does get bread, and he who sleeps gets it even more abundantly than he who works. In the external world, everything belongs to the possessor. It is subject to the law of indifference, and the spirit of the ring obeys the one who has the ring, whether he is an Aladdin or a Nouredin, and he who has the wealth of the world has it regardless of how he got it.

It is different in the world of the spirit. Here an eternal divine order prevails. Here it does not rain on both the just and the unjust; here the sun does not shine on both good and evil. Here it holds true that only the one who works gets bread, that only the one who was in anxiety finds rest, that only the one who descends into the lower world rescues the beloved, that only the one who draws the knife gets Isaac. He who will not work does not get bread but is deceived just as the gods deceived Orpheus with an ethereal phantom instead of the beloved, deceived him because he was a zither player and not a man. Here it does not help to have Abraham as a father or to have seventeen ancestors. The one who will not work fits what is written about the Virgins of Israel; he gives birth to wind—but the one who will work gives birth to his own father.

There is a knowledge that presumptuously wants to introduce into the world of spirit the same law of indifference under which the external world sighs. It believes that it is enough to know what is great—no other work is needed. But for this reason it does not get bread; it perishes of hunger while everything changes to gold. And what in fact does it know? There were many thousands of Greek contemporaries, countless numbers in later generations, who knew all the triumphs of Miltiades, but there was only one who became sleepless over them. There were countless generations who knew the story of Abraham by heart, word for word, but how many did it render sleepless?

**H**E must embrace solitude as a bride. He must have his glees and his glooms alone. His own estimate must be measure enough, his own praise reward enough for him. And why must the student be solitary and silent? That he may become acquainted with his thoughts. If he pines in a lonely place, hankering for the crowd, for display, he is not in the lonely place; his heart is in the market; he does not see; he does not hear; he does not think. But go cherish your soul; expel companions; set your habits to a life of solitude; then will the faculties rise fair and full within, like forest trees and field flowers; you will have results, which, when you meet your fellow-men, you can communicate, and they will gladly receive. Do not go into solitude only that you may presently come into public. Such solitude denies itself; it is public and state. The public can get public experience, but they wish the scholar to replace to them those private, sincere, divine experiences, of which they have been defrauded by dwelling in the street. It is the noble, manlike, just thought, which is the superiority demanded of you, and not crowds but solitude confers this elevation. Not insulation of place, but independence of spirit is essential, and it is only as the garden, the cottage, the forest, and the rock, are a sort of mechanical aids to this, that they are of value. Think alone, and all places are friendly and sacred. The poets who have lived in cities have been hermits still. Inspiration makes solitude anywhere. Pindar, Raphael, Angelo, Dryden, De Stael, dwell in crowds, it may be, but the instant thought comes, the crowd grows dim to their eye;

their eye fixes on the horizon,—on vacant space; they forget the bystanders; they spurn personal relations; they deal with abstractions, with verities, with ideas. They are alone in the mind.

We live in the sun and on the surface,—a thin, plausible superficial existence, and talk of muse and prophet, of art and creation. But out of our shallow and frivolous way of life, how can greatness ever grow? Come now, let us go and be dumb. Let us sit with our hands on our mouths, a long, austere, Pythagorean lustrum. Let us live in corners, and do chores, and suffer, and weep, and drudge, with eyes and hearts that love the Lord. Silence, seclusion, austerity, may pierce deep into the grandeur and secret of our being, and so diving, bring up out of secular darkness, the sublimities of the moral constitution. How mean to go blazing, a gaudy butterfly, in fashionable or political saloons, the foot of society, the foot of notoriety, a topic for newspapers, a piece of the street, and forfeiting the real prerogative of the russet coat, the privacy and the true and warm heart of the citizen!

**G**OOD deeds are such as are equibanced, maintaining the Mean between two equally bad extremes—the too much and the too little. Virtues are the dispositions which are midway between two reprehensible extremes, one of which is characterized by excess, the other by deficiency. Good deeds are the product of these dispositions. To illustrate, abstemiousness is a disposition which adopts a middle course between inordinate passion and total insensibility to pleasure. Abstemiousness, then, is a proper rule of conduct, and the disposition which gives rise to it is an ethical quality; but inordinate passion, the extreme of excess, and insensibility to enjoyment, the extreme of deficiency, are both absolutely pernicious. Likewise, liberality is the Mean between miserliness and extravagance; courage, between recklessness and cowardice; dignity, between haughtiness and loutishness; humility, between arrogance and self-abasement; contentedness, between avarice and slothful indifference; gentleness, between irascibility and insensibility to shame and disgrace; and, modesty, between impudence and shamefacedness. So it is with the other qualities.

It often happens, however, that men err as regards these qualities, imagining that one of the extremes is good, and is a virtue. Sometimes, the extreme of too much is considered noble, as when bravado is made a virtue, and those who recklessly risk their lives are hailed as heroes. Thus, when people see a man who runs deliberately into danger, intentionally tempting death, and escaping only by mere chance, they laud such a one to the skies, and say that he is a hero. At other times, the opposite extreme, the too little, is greatly esteemed, and the coward is considered a man of prudence, the loafer a man of contentment, and a bovine creature a man of moderation. In like manner, profuse liberality and extreme lavishness are extolled as excellent characteristics. This is, however, an absolutely mistaken view, for the middle course alone is praiseworthy, and everyone should strive to adhere to it at all times.

FOR there are two classes of precious things in the world; those that God gives us for nothing—sun, air, and life; and the secondarily precious things, worldly wine and milk, can only be bought for definite money; they can never be cheapened. No cheating nor bargaining will ever get a single thing out of nature's "establishment" at half-price. Do we want to be strong?—we must work. To be hungry?—we must starve. To be happy?—we must be kind. To be wise?—we must look and think. No changing of place at a hundred miles an hour, not making of stuffs a thousand yards a minute, will, make us one whit stronger, or happier, or wiser. There was always more in the world than men could see, walked they ever so slowly; they will see it no better for going fast. And they will at last, and soon too, find out that their grand inventions for conquering (as they think) space and time, do, in reality, conquer nothing; for space and time are, in their own essence, unconquerable, and besides did not want any sort of conquering; they wanted using. A fool always wants to shorten space and time: a wise man wants to lengthen both. A fool wants to kill space and time: a wise man, first to gain them, then to animate them. Your railroad, when you come to understand it, is only a device for making the world smaller; and as for being able to talk from place to place, that is, indeed, well and

convenient; but suppose you have, originally, nothing to say. We shall be obliged at last to confess, what we should have known long ago, that the really precious things are thought and sight, not pace. It does a bullet no good to go fast; and a man, if he be truly a man, no harm to go slow; for his glory is not at all in going, but in being.

"Well; but railroads and telegraphs are so useful for communicating knowledge to savage nations." Yes, if you have any to give them. If you know nothing but railroads, you can communicate nothing but aqueous vapor and gunpowder,—what then? But if you have any other things than those to give, then the railroad is of use only because it communicates that other thing; and the question is—what that other thing may be? Is it religion? I believe that if we had really wanted to communicate that, we could have done it in less than 1800 years, without steam. Most of the good religious communication that I remember, has been done on foot; and it cannot easily be done faster than at foot pace. Is it science? But what science—of motion, meat, and medicine? Well; when you have moved your savage, fed him with white bread, and shown him how to set a limb,—what next? Follow out that question. Suppose every obstacle overcome; give your savage every advantage of civilization to the full; suppose that you have put the Red Indian in tight shoes; taught the Chinese how to make Wedgwood's ware, and to paint it with colours, that will rub off; and persuaded all Hindoo women that it is more pious to torment their husbands into graves than to burn themselves at the burial, what next? Gradually, thinking on from point to point, we shall come to perceive that all true happiness and nobleness are near us, and yet neglected by us; and that till we have learned how to be happy and noble we have not much to tell, even to Red Indians. The delights of horse-racing and hunting, of assemblies in the night instead of the day, of costly and wearisome music of costly and burdensome dress, of chagrined contention for place or power, or wealth, or the eyes of the multitude; and all the endless occupation without purpose, and idleness without rest, of our vulgar world, are not, it seems to me, enjoyments we need be ambitious to communicate. And all real and wholesome enjoyments possible to man have been just as possible to him, since first he was made of the

earth, as they are now; and they are possible to him chiefly in peace. To watch the corn grow, and the blossoms to set; to draw hard breath over a ploughshare or spade; to read, to think, to love, to hope, to pray,—these are the things that make men happy; they have always had the power of doing this, they never will have the power to do more. The world's prosperity or adversity depends on our knowing and teaching these few things; but upon iron, or glass, or electricity, or steam, in no wise.

IN our age, when men seem more than ever prone to confuse wisdom with knowledge, and knowledge with information, and to try to solve problems of life in terms of engineering, there is coming into existence a new kind of provincialism which perhaps deserves a new name. It is a provincialism not of space, but of time; one for which history is merely the chronicle of human devices which have served their turn and been scrapped, one for which the world is the property solely of the living, a property in which the dead hold no shares. The menace of this kind of provincialism is, that we can all, all the peoples on the globe, be provincials together; and those who are not content to be provincials, can only become hermits. If this kind of provincialism led to a greater tolerance, in the sense of forbearance, there might be more to be said for it, but it seems more likely to lead to our becoming indifferent, in matters where we ought to maintain a distinctive dogma or standard, and to our becoming intolerant, in matters which might be left to personal preference. We may have as many varieties of religion as we like, provided that we all send our children to the same schools.

THE different tribes have no government or chief; yet each is surrounded by other hostile tribes, speaking different dialects, and separated from each other only by a deserted border or neutral territory: the cause of their warfare appears to be the means of subsistence. Their country is a broken mass of wild rocks, lofty hills, and useless forests: and these are viewed through mists and endless storms. The habitable land is reduced to the stones on the beach; in search of food they are compelled unceasingly to wander

from spot to spot, and so steep is the coast, that they can only move about in their wretched canoes. They cannot know the feeling of having a home, and still less that of domestic affection; for the husband is to the wife a brutal master to a laborious slave. Was a more horrid deed ever perpetrated, than that witnessed on the west coast by Byron, who saw a wretched mother pick up her bleeding dying infant-boy, whom her husband had mercilessly dashed on the stones for dropping a basket of sea-eggs! How little can the higher powers of the mind be brought into play: what is there for imagination to picture, for reason to compare, for judgment to decide upon? To knock a limpet from the rock does not require even cunning, that lowest power of the mind. Their skill in some respects may be compared to the instinct of animals; for it is not improved by experience: the canoe, their most ingenious work, poor as it is, has remained the same, as we know from Drake, for the last two hundred and fifty years.

Whilst beholding these savages, one asks, whence have they come? What could have tempted, or what change compelled a tribe of men, to leave the fine regions of the north, to travel down the Cordillera, or backbone of America, to invent and build canoes, which are not used by the tribes of Chile, Peru, or Brazil, and then to enter on one of the most inhospitable countries within the limits of the globe? Although such reflections must at first seize on the mind, yet we may feel sure that they are partly erroneous. There is no reason to believe that the Fuegians decrease in number; therefore we must suppose that they enjoy a sufficient share of happiness, of whatever kind it may be, to render life worth having. Nature by making habit omnipotent, and its effects hereditary, has fitted the Fuegian to the climate and the productions of his miserable country.

WHAT are the great faults of conversation? Want of ideas, want of words, want of manners, are the principal ones, I suppose you think. I don't doubt it, but I will, tell you what I have found spoil more good talks than anything else;—long arguments on special points between people who differ on fundamental principles upon which these points depend. No men can have satisfactory

relations with each other until they have agreed on certain ultimata of belief not to be disturbed in ordinary conversation, and unless they have sense enough to trace the secondary questions depending upon these ultimate beliefs to their source. In short, just as a written constitution is essential to the best social order, so a code of finalities is a necessary condition of profitable talk between two persons. Talking is like playing on the harp; there is as much in laying the hand on the strings to stop their vibrations as in twanging them to bring out their music.

WHEN the anarchist, as the mouthpiece of the declining strata of society, demands with a fine indignation what is “right,” “justice,” and “equal rights,” he is merely under the pressure of his own uncultured state, which cannot comprehend the real reason for his suffering—what it is that he is poor in: Life. A causal instinct asserts itself in him: it must be somebody’s fault that he is in a bad way.

Also, the “fine indignation” itself soothes him; it is a pleasure for all wretched devils to scold; it gives a slight but intoxicating sense of power. Even plaintiveness and complaining can give life a charm for the sake of which one endures it: there is a fine dose of revenge in every complaint; one charges one’s own bad situation, and under certain circumstances even one’s own badness, to those who are different, as if that were an injustice, a forbidden privilege. “If I am a canaille, you ought to be too”—on such logic are revolutions made.

Complaining is never any good: it stems from weakness. Whether one charges one’s misfortunes to others or to oneself—the socialist does the former; the Christian, for example, the latter—really makes no difference. The common, and, let us add, the unworthy, thing is that it is supposed to be somebody’s fault that one is suffering; in short, that the sufferer prescribes the honey of revenge for himself against his suffering. The objects of this need for revenge, as a need for pleasure, are mere occasions; everywhere the sufferer finds occasions for satisfying his little revenge. If he is a Christian—to repeat it once more—he finds them in himself. The Christian and the anarchist are both decadents. When the Christian condemns, slanders, and besmirches “the world,” his instinct is the same as that which

prompts the socialist worker to condemn, slander, and besmirch “society.” The “last judgment” is the sweet comfort of revenge—the revolution, which the socialist worker also awaits, but conceived as a little farther off. The “beyond”—and why a beyond, if not as a means for besmirching this world?

WHAT if some wise man, dropped from heaven, should suddenly confront me at this point and exclaim that the person whom everyone has looked up to as a god and ruler is not even a man, because he is led sheeplike by his passions; that he is the meanest slave because he voluntarily serves so many and such foul masters? Or what if this wise man should instruct some one mourning his parent’s death to laugh, on the grounds that the parent had at last really begun to live—our life here being in one way nothing but a kind of death? And what if he should entitle another, who was glorifying in ancestry, ignoble and illegitimate, because he was so far from virtue, the only source of nobility? And what if he should speak of all others in the same way? What, I ask, would he gain by it except to be regarded as dangerously insane by everyone? Just as nothing is more foolish than unseasonable wisdom, so nothing is more imprudent than bull-headed prudence. And he is indeed perverse who does not accommodate himself to the way of the world, who will not follow the crowd, who does not at least remember the rule of good fellowship, drink or begone, and who demands that the play shall no longer be a play. True prudence, on the contrary, consists in not desiring more wisdom than is proper to mortals, and in being willing to wink at the doings of the crowd or to go along with it sociably. But that, they say, is folly itself. I shall certainly not deny it; yet they must in turn admit that it is also to act the play of life.

I hesitate to speak about the next point. But why should I be silent about what is truer than truth? For so great an undertaking, however, it would probably be wise to call the Muses from Helicon; the poets usually invoke them on the slightest pretext. Therefore, stand by for a moment, daughters of Jove, while I show that one can not acquire that widely advertised wisdom, which the wise call the secret of happiness, unless one follows the leadership of Folly. First, everyone

admits that all emotions belong to folly. Indeed a fool and a wise man are distinguished by the fact that emotions control the former, and reason the latter. Now the Stoics would purge the wise man of all strong emotions, as if they were diseases; yet those emotions serve not only as a guide and teacher to those who are hastening toward the portal of wisdom, but also as a stimulus in all virtuous actions, as exhorters to good deeds. Of course, that superstoic, Seneca, strongly denies this and strips the wise of absolutely every emotion; yet in so doing he leaves something that is not a man at all, but rather a new kind of god or sub-god who never existed and never will. To put it bluntly, he makes a marble imitation of a man, stupid, and altogether alien to every human feeling.

If this is the way they want it, let them keep their wise man. They can love him without any rivals and live with him in Plato's republic or, if they prefer, in the realm of Ideas, or in the garden of Tantalus. Who would not shudder at such a man and flee from him as from a ghost? He would be insensible to every natural feeling, no more moved by love or pity than if he were solid flint or Marpesian stone. Nothing escapes him; he never makes a mistake; like another Lynceus he sees all; he evaluates everything rigidly; he excuses nothing; he alone is satisfied with himself as the only one who is really rich, sane, royal, free—in short, unique in everything, but only so in his own opinion. Desiring no friend, he is himself the friend of none. He does not hesitate to bid the gods go hang themselves. All that life holds he condemns and scorns as folly. And this animal is the perfect wise man.

I ask you, if it were put to a vote, what city would choose such a person as mayor? What army would want such a general? What woman such a husband? Who would not rather have any man at all from the rank and file of fools? Now such a choice, being a fool, would be able to command or obey fools. He would be able to please those like himself—or nearly everyone; he would be kind to his wife, a jolly friend, a gay companion, a polished guest; finally, he would consider nothing human alien to him. But this wise man has been boring me for some time; let us turn to other instructive topics.



# The Third Great Booklet

Vexatious Readings  
from  
Various Minds

## A Leaflet For The Masses

FROM  
THE UNDERGROUND TRACTARIAN SOCIETY



I AM glad to hear that you are employed in things good and new, in your music and drawing. You know what have been my fears for some time past—that you do not employ yourself so closely as I could wish. You have promised me a more assiduous attention, and I have great confidence in what you promise. It is your future happiness which interests me, and nothing can contribute more to it (moral rectitude always excepted) than the contracting a habit of industry and activity. Of all the cankers of human happiness none corrodes with so silent, yet so baneful a tooth, as indolence. Body and mind both unemployed, our being becomes a burthen, and every object about us loathsome, even the dearest. Idleness begets ennui, ennui the hypochondria, and that a diseased body. No laborious person was ever yet hysterical. Exercise and application produce order in our affairs, health of body, cheerfulness of mind, and these make us precious to our friends. It is while we are young that the habit of industry is formed. If not then, it never is afterwards. The fortune of our lives, therefore, depends on employing well the short period of youth. If at any moment, my dear, you catch yourself in idleness, start from it as you would from the precipice of a gulf. You are not, however, to consider yourself in idleness while taking exercise. That is necessary for your health, and health is the first of all objects. For this reason, if you leave your dancing-master for the summer, you must increase your other exercise.

I do not like your saying that you are unable to read the ancient print of your Livy, but with the aid of your master. We are always equal to what we undertake with resolution. A little degree of this will enable you to decipher your Livy. If you always lean on your master, you will never be able to proceed without him. It is part of the American character to consider nothing as desperate—to surmount every difficulty by resolution and contrivance. In Europe there are shops for every want: its inhabitants therefore have no idea that their wants can be furnished otherwise. Remote from all other aid, we are obliged to invent and to execute; to find means within ourselves, and not to lean on others. Consider, therefore, the conquering of your Livy as an exercise in the habit of surmounting difficulties; a habit which will be necessary to you in the country where you are to live, and without which you will be thought a very helpless animal, and less esteemed.

ANOTHER cause of mental disease is the exclusive exercise of the intellect or feelings. If the eye is taxed beyond its strength by protracted use, its blood-vessels become gorged, and the bloodshot appearance warns of the excess and the need of rest. The brain is affected in a similar manner by excessive use, though the suffering and inflamed organ can not make its appeal to the eye. But there are some indications which ought never to be misunderstood or disregarded. In cases of pupils at school or college, a diseased state, from over-action, is often manifested by increased clearness of mind, and temporary ease and vigor of mental action. In one instance, known to the writer, a most exemplary and industrious pupil, anxious to improve every hour and ignorant or unmindful of the laws of health, first manifested the diseased state of her brain and mind by demands for more studies, and a sudden and earnest activity in planning modes of improvement for herself and others. When warned of her danger, she protested that she never was better in her life; that she took regular exercise in the open air, went to bed in season, slept soundly, and felt perfectly well; that her mind was never before so bright and clear, and study never so easy and delightful. And, at this time, she was on the

verge of derangement, from which she was saved only by an entire cessation of all intellectual efforts.

I HAVE wanted in late years to go further and further in making the metaphor the whole of thinking. I find someone now and then to agree with me that all thinking, except mathematical thinking, is metaphorical, or all thinking except scientific thinking. The mathematical might be difficult for me to bring in, but the scientific is easy enough.

What I am pointing out is that unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strengths and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history.

All metaphor breaks down somewhere. That is the beauty of it. It is touch and go with the metaphor, and until you have lived with it long enough you don't know when it is going. You don't know how much you can get out of it and when it will cease to yield. It is a very living thing. It is as life itself.

We still ask boys in college to think, as in the nineties, but we seldom tell them what thinking means; we seldom tell them that it is just putting this and that together; it is just saying one thing in terms of another. To tell them is to set their feet on the first rung of a ladder the top of which sticks through the sky.

TRUTH is within ourselves; it takes no rise from outward things, whate'er you may believe. There is an inmost centre in us all, where truth abides in fulness; and around, wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in, this perfect, clear perception—which is truth. A baffling and perverted carnal mesh binds it, and makes all error; and to know, rather consists in opening out a way whence the imprisoned splendor may escape, than in effecting entry for a light supposed to be without.

SEEING the wisdom of Socrates and several circumstances of his condemnation, I venture to believe that he lent himself to it to some extent, purposely, by prevarication, being seventy, and having so soon to suffer an increasing torpor of the rich activity of his mind, and the dimming of its accustomed brightness.

What metamorphoses I see old age producing in many of my acquaintances! It is a powerful malady, and it creeps in on us naturally and imperceptibly. We need a great provision of study, and great precautions, to avoid the imperfections it loads upon us, or at least to slow up their progress. I feel that, notwithstanding all my retrenchments, it gains on me foot by foot. I stand fast as well as I can. But I do not know where it will lead even me in the end.

WHEN all these conquests had been added to the Lydian empire, and the prosperity of Sardis was now at its height, there came thither, one after another, all the sages of Greece living at the time, and among them Solon, the Athenian. He was on his travels, having left Athens to be absent ten years, under the pretense of wishing to see the world, but really to avoid being forced to repeal any of the laws which, at the request of the Athenians, he had made for them. Without his sanction the Athenians could not repeal them, as they had bound themselves under a heavy curse to be governed for ten years by the laws which should be imposed on them by Solon.

On this account, as well as to see the world, Solon set out upon his travels, in the course of which he went to Egypt to the court of Amasis, and also came on a visit to Croesus at Sardis. Croesus received him as his guest, and lodged him in the royal palace. On the third or fourth day after, he bade his servants conduct Solon over his treasures, and show him all their greatness and magnificence. When he had seen them all, and, so far as time allowed, inspected them, Croesus addressed this question to him.

“Stranger of Athens, we have heard much of thy wisdom and of thy travels through many lands, from love of knowledge and a wish to see the world. I am curious therefore to inquire of thee,

whom, of all the men that thou hast seen, thou deemest the most happy?”

This he asked because he thought himself the happiest of mortals: but Solon answered him without flattery, according to his true sentiments, “Tellus of Athens, sire.”

Full of astonishment at what he heard, Croesus demanded sharply, “And wherefore dost thou deem Tellus happiest?”

To which the other replied, “First, because his country was flourishing in his days, and he himself had sons both beautiful and good, and he lived to see children born to each of them, and these children all grew up; and further because, after a life spent in what our people look upon as comfort, his end was surpassingly glorious. In a battle between the Athenians and their neighbors near Eleusis, he came to the assistance of his countrymen, routed the foe, and died upon the field most gallantly. The Athenians gave him a public funeral on the spot where he fell, and paid him the highest honors.”

Thus did Solon admonish Croesus by the example of Tellus, enumerating the manifold particulars of his happiness. When he had ended, Croesus inquired a second time, who after Tellus seemed to him to be the happiest, expecting that at any rate, he would be given the second place.

“Cleobis and Bito,” Solon answered. “They were of the Argive race; their fortune was enough for their wants, and they were besides endowed with so much bodily strength that they both gained prizes at the Games. Also this tale is told of them:—There was a great festival in honor of the goddess Juno at Argos, to which their mother must needs be taken in wagon. Now the oxen did not come home from the field in time: so the youths, fearful of being too late, put the yoke on their own necks, and themselves drew the wagon in which their mother rode. Five and forty furlongs did they draw her, and stopped before the temple. This deed of theirs was witnessed by the whole assembly of worshippers, and then their lives closed in the best possible way. Herein, too, God showed forth most evidently, how much better a thing death is for man than life. For the Argive men, who stood around the wagon, extolled the vast strength of the youths; and the Argive women extolled the mother, who was blessed with such a pair of sons; and the mother herself, overjoyed at the deed and at the praises it

had won, standing straight before the image, besought the goddess to bestow on Cleobis and Bito, the sons who had so mightily honored her, the highest blessing to which mortals can attain. Her prayer ended, they offered sacrifice and partook of the holy banquet, after which the two youths fell asleep in the temple. They never woke more, but so passed from the earth. The Argives, looking on them as among the best of men, caused statues of them to be made, which they gave to the shrine at Delphi.”

THE world of evil is so far beyond our understanding! Nor can I really succeed in picturing Hell as a world, a universe. It is nothing, never will be anything but a half-formed shape, the hideous shape of an abortion, a stunted thing on the very verge of all existence. I think of sullied, translucent patches on the sea. Does the Monster care that there should be one criminal more or less? Immediately he sucks down the crime into himself, makes it one with his own horrible substance, digests without once arousing from his terrifying eternal lethargy. Yet historians, moralists, even philosophers refuse to see anything but the criminal, they re-create evil in the image and likeness of humanity. They form no idea of essential evil, that vast yearning for the void, for emptiness; since if ever our species is to perish it will die of boredom, of stale disgust. Humanity will have been slowly eaten up as a beam by invisible fungi, which transform in a few weeks a block of oakwood into spongy matter which our fingers have no difficulty in breaking. And the moralist will dissertate on passions, the statesman redouble his police, the educationalist draw up new courses of study—treasures will be squandered wholesale for the useless moulding of a dough which contains no leaven.

(As for instance the world wars of today which would seem to show such prodigious human activity, are in fact indictments of the growing apathy of humanity. In the end, at certain stated periods, they will lead huge flocks of resigned sheep to be slaughtered.)

We are told that the earth is still quite young, after thousands of centuries, still as it were in the pristine stages of its planetary evolution. Evil too is only at its beginning.

“Are you, then,” he said, “no longer a democracy in England?”

Barker laughed.

“The situation invites paradox,” he said. “We are, in a sense, the purest democracy. We have become a despotism. Have you not noticed how continually in history democracy becomes despotism? People call it the decay of democracy. It is simply its fulfillment. Why take the trouble to number and register and enfranchise all the innumerable Jack Robinsons, when you can take one Jack Robinson with the same intellect or lack of intellect as all the rest, and have done with it? The old idealistic republicans used to found democracy on the idea that all men were equally intelligent. Believe me, the sane and enduring democracy is founded on the fact that all men are equally idiotic. Why should we not choose out one of them as much as another? All that we want for government is a man not criminal and insane, who can rapidly look over some petitions and sign some proclamations. To think what time was wasted in arguing about the House of Lords, Tories saying that it ought to be preserved because it was clever, and Radicals saying it ought to be destroyed because it was stupid, and all the time no one saw that it was right because it was stupid, because the chance mob of ordinary men thrown there by accident of blood, were a great democratic protest against the Lower House, against the eternal insolence of the aristocracy of talents. We have established now in England, the thing towards which all systems have dimly groped, the dull popular despotism without illusions. We want one man at the head of our State, not because he is brilliant or virtuous, but because he is one man and not a chattering crowd. To avoid the possible chance of hereditary diseases or such things, we have abandoned hereditary monarchy. The King of England is chosen like a juryman upon an official rotation list. Beyond that the whole system is quietly despotic, and we have not found it raise a murmur.”

“Do you really mean,” asked the President, incredulously, “that you choose any ordinary man and make him despot—that you trust to the chance of some alphabetical list?”

“And why not?” cried Barker. “Did not half the historical nations trust to the chance of the eldest

sons of eldest sons, and did not half of them get on tolerably well? To have a perfect system is impossible; to have a system is indispensable. All hereditary monarchies were a matter of luck: so are alphabetic monarchies. Can you find a deep philosophical meaning in the difference between Stuarts and the Hanoverians? Believe me, I will undertake to find a deep philosophical meaning in the contrast between the dark tragedy of the A's, and the solid success of the B's."

"And you risk it?" asked the other. "Though the man may be a tyrant or a cynic or a criminal?"

"We risk it," answered Barker, with a perfect placidity. "Suppose he is a tyrant—he is still a check on a hundred tyrants. Suppose he is a cynic—it is to his interest to govern well. Suppose he is a criminal—by removing poverty and substituting power, we put a check on his criminality. In short, by substituting despotisms we have put a total check on one criminal and a partial check on all the rest."

The Nicaraguan old gentleman leaned over with a queer expression in his eyes. "My church, sir," he said, "has taught me to respect faith. I do not wish to speak with disrespect of yours, however fantastic. But do you really mean that you will trust to the ordinary man, the man who may happen to come next, as a good despot?"

I do," said Barker simply. "He may not be a good man. But he will be a good despot. For when he comes to a mere business routine of government he will endeavour to do ordinary justice. Do we not assume the same thing in a jury?"

The old President smiled.

"I don't know," he said, "that I have any particular objection in detail to your excellent scheme of Government. My only objection is a quite personal one. It is, that if I were asked whether I would belong to it, I should ask first of all, if I was not permitted, as an alternative, to be a toad in a ditch. That is all. You cannot argue with the choice of the soul."

**M**EN seek retreats for themselves, houses in the country, seashores, and mountains; and you too are wont to desire such things very much. But this is altogether a mark of the common sort of man, for it is in your power, whenever you shall

choose, to retire into yourself. For nowhere with more quiet or more freedom from trouble does a man retire than into his own soul, particularly when he has within himself such thoughts that by looking into them he is at once perfectly tranquil; and this tranquility, I am sure, is nothing but the good ordering of the mind. Constantly then grant yourself this retreat and refreshment; let your principles be brief and fundamental, which, as soon as you shall call them to mind, will be sufficient to cleanse the soul completely, and send you back free from all discontent with the stale things to which you return.

*Style cannot go beyond the ideas which lie at the heart of it. If they are clear, it too will be clear. If they are held passionately, it will be eloquent. Trying to teach it to persons who cannot think, especially when attempted by persons who cannot think, is a great waste of time.*

*It would be far more logical to devote all the energy to teaching, not writing, but logic. For I doubt that the art of thinking can be taught at all—at any rate, by school teachers. It is not acquired but congenital. Some persons are born with it. Their ideas flow in straight channels; they are capable of lucid reasoning; when they write anything it is clear and persuasive. They constitute, I should say, about one-eighth of one percent of the human race.*

**T**HE queerest thing about his teaching is that we do not know exactly what he taught. We know how he taught. We know that very well. But we do not know precisely what lessons his pupils and interlocutors drew from his questioning. His different pupils say he taught different things. Young Xenophon knew him before going out East to become a soldier of fortune, and wrote memoirs of him later. He shows Socrates as an inquisitive, pawky, charming but annoying eccentric, who inquired into everything and criticized everything more or less indiscriminately. Another of his pupils, Aristippus, thought he destroyed all moral traditions and all permanent spiritual values by his criticism and encouraged men to live a life without conventions, following only pleasure and

the instincts. Plato himself began by writing conversations in which Socrates proved nothing except that no one knows anything; or, at most, that virtue must be knowledge. Then, he went on to conversations where Socrates, after breaking down traditional theories, proceeded to build up elaborate theories of his own—still working on the question-and-answer principle, but reducing the other man to a mere stooge saying “Yes” and “No” and “Go on.” Some of these theories are called Plato’s by later writers. Were they Plato’s, or did Socrates teach them?

Evidently the answer is “both.” Socrates did not teach them in their fully explicit form, or his other pupils would have remembered them also. But Plato did not work them out entirely on his own. They were produced by the action of Socrates’ teaching upon his mind. Also, we must remember that anyone who taught so well as Socrates and who used cross-examination as his method cannot have thrown out questions at random. He must have had some set of positive beliefs from which his questions flowed; and even if he did not explain them positively, his more brilliant pupils could reconstruct them. His teaching therefore is one of the great examples of the power of implication. What a teacher says outright sometimes goes unheard. What he stimulates his pupils to think out for themselves often has a far more potent influence upon them.

**S**OCRATES had refused to compromise his personal integrity. Plato, with all his uncompromising canvas-cleaning, was led along a path on which he compromised his integrity with every stop that he took. He was forced to combat free thought, and the pursuit of truth. He was led to defend lying, political miracles, tabooistic superstition, the suppression of truth, and ultimately, brutal violence. In spite of Socrates’ warning against misanthropy and misology, he was led to distrust man and to fear argument. In spite of his own hatred of tyranny, he was led to look to a tyrant for help, and to defend the most tyrannical measures. By the internal logic of his anti-humanitarian aim, the internal logic of power, he was led unaware to the same point to which once the Thirty had been led, and at which, later, his friend Dio arrived, and others among his

numerous tyrant-disciples. He did not succeed in arresting social change. Instead, he succeeded in binding himself by his own spell, to powers which once he had hated.

The lesson which we should learn from Plato is the exact opposite of what he tries to teach us. It is a lesson which must not be forgotten. Excellent as Plato’s sociological diagnosis was, his own development proves that the therapy he recommended is worse than the evil he tried to combat. Arresting political change is not the remedy; it cannot bring happiness. We can never return to the alleged innocence and beauty of the closed society. Our dream of heaven cannot be realized on earth. Once we begin to rely upon our reason, and to use our powers of criticism, once we feel that call of personal responsibilities, and with it the responsibility of helping to advance knowledge, we cannot return to a state of implicit submission to tribal magic. For those who have eaten of the tree of knowledge, paradise is lost. The more we try to return to the heroic age of tribalism, the more surely do we arrive at the Inquisition, at the Secret Police, and at a romanticized gangsterism. Beginning with the suppression of reason and truth, we must end with the most brutal and violent destruction of all that is human. *There is no return to a harmonious state of nature. If we turn back, then we must go the whole way—we must return to the beasts.*

It is an issue which we must face squarely, hard though it may be for us to do so. If we dream of a return to our childhood, if we are tempted to rely on others and so be happy, if we shrink from the task of carrying our cross, the cross of humaneness, of reason, of responsibility, if we lose courage and flinch from the strain, then we must try to fortify ourselves with a clear understanding of the decision before us. We can return to the beasts. But if we wish to remain human, then there is only one way, the way into the open society. We must go on into the unknown, the uncertain and insecure, using what reason we have to plan as well as we can for both, security *and* freedom.





# The Fourth Great Booklet

Vexatious Readings  
from  
Various Minds

## A Leaflet For The Masses

FROM  
THE UNDERGROUND TRACTARIAN SOCIETY



WE think often of those school people in Tennessee who were delighted that a student editor had chosen, as an epigraph for the yearbook, a line that so beautifully and accurately expressed their own noblest beliefs about the great purpose of education: "To each according to his needs; from each according to his abilities." When they discovered, too late, that those were the words of Karl Marx, delight fled, but, most unjustly, all unaccompanied by any of the noblest beliefs of the Educators of Tennessee.

With this startling—but not strange—event in mind, we have decided not to reveal the names of the authors of the passages in this collection. This may, of course, deprive some authors of the honor, and some of the disgrace, that they deserve, and for both we are sorry. Those who deserve honor will forgive us.

Nevertheless, if you can not rest until you know their names, we are willing to provide them, or, at least those we can remember.

I have written *The Book of Kings*, which will remain as a memory of my life in this world. The palaces men build fall into ruin under the rain and the heat of the sun; I have built with these verses a magnificent palace which the storm and the rain will not injure; the years will roll over this book, but men everywhere will recite it. I learned how to weave this golden cloth because I discovered long ago the secret of words.

Oh, you who look into the past, how often are you also joyous like me, and how often like me are you full of sorrow. How astonishing is the swift motion of this vaulted sky above all our heads! How often is the soul burdened with still more recent troubles!

One man's lot is all honey and sugar, good health, sheltered life, and high fortunes; the years of another are so filled with grief and toil that his heart breaks in this fleeting world; a third man's life is spent in disappointment—sometimes he wins, but oftener he loses. That is the way fate lifts us up, and the pain caused by the thorns is greater than the pleasure we felt at the color of the rose. If only the sixty nets of the years were like fishnets, then a clever man could find his way out; but we can none of us escape from this sky that revolves at the will of Him who made sun and earth.

Even the great conquerors of Persia struggled painfully in vain, loved combat in vain, and ceased to take pleasure in their wealth; they too departed for another world and left here all the fruits of their labors.

Consider the fate of the greatest Shah of Shahs, Cyrus the Great; examine once more the old, old stories of the world. Learn how even Cyrus did not remain upon the earth, how men by the millions ceased to obey his commands.

That is the law of every life; therefore rid your hearts of anxiety.

BUT suppose the boy had not been taught by a priest but by a professor, by one of the professors who simplify the relation of men and beasts to a mere evolutionary variation. Suppose the boy saw himself, with the same simplicity and sincerity, as a mere Mowgli running with the pack of nature and roughly indistinguishable from the rest save by a relative and recent variation. What would be for him the simplest lesson of this stone picture-book? After all, it would come back to this, that he had dug very deep and found the place where a man had drawn the picture of a reindeer. But he would dig a good deal deeper before he found a place where a reindeer had drawn the picture of a man. That sounds like a truism, but in this connection it is really a very tremendous truth. He might descend to depths unthinkable, he might sink into sunken continents as strange as remote

stars, he might find himself in the inside of the world as far from men as the other side of the moon; he might see in those cold caverns or colossal terraces of stone the faint hieroglyphic of the fossil, the ruins of lost dynasties of biological life, rather like the ruins of separate creations and separate universes than the stages in the story of one. He would find the trail of monsters blindly developing in directions outside all our common imagery of fish and bird; groping and grasping and touching life with every extravagant elongation of horn and tongue and tentacle; growing a forest of fantastic caricatures of the claw and the fin and the finger. But nowhere would he find one finger that had traced a significant line upon the sand; nowhere one claw that had even begun to scratch the faint suggestion of a form. To all appearance, the thing would be as unthinkable in all those countless cosmic variations of forgotten æons as it would be in the beasts and birds before our eyes. The child would no more expect to see it than he would expect to see the cat scratch on the wall a vindictive caricature of the dog. The childish common sense would keep the most evolutionary child from expecting to see anything like that; yet in the traces of the rude and recently evolved ancestors of humanity he would have seen exactly that. It must surely strike him as strange that men so remote from him should be so near, and that beasts so near to him should be so remote. To his simplicity it must seem at least odd that he could not find any trace of the beginning of any arts among any animals. That is the simplest lesson to learn in the cavern of colored pictures; only it is too simple to be learnt. It is the simple truth that man does differ from the brutes in kind and not in degree; and the proof of it is here; that it sounds like a truism to say that the most primitive man drew a picture of a monkey, and that it sounds like a joke to say that the most intelligent monkey drew a picture of a man. Something of division and disproportion has appeared; and it is unique. Art is the signature of man.

**B**Y a natural blending of patriotic pride with grateful piety, the very spirits of the Athenians who fell at Marathon were deified by their countrymen. The inhabitants of the district of Marathon paid religious rites to them; and orators

solemnly invoked them in their most impassioned adjurations before the assembled men of Athens. “Nothing was omitted,” writes Thirwall, “that could keep alive the remembrance of a deed which had first taught the Athenian people to know its own strength, by measuring it with the power that had subdued the greater part of the known world. The consciousness thus awakened fixed its character, its station, and its destiny; it was the spring of its later great actions and its ambitious enterprises.”

It was not indeed by one defeat, however signal, that the pride of Persia could be broken, and her dreams of universal empire dispelled. Ten years afterwards she renewed her attempts upon Europe on a grander scale, and was repulsed by Greece with greater and reiterated loss. Larger forces and heavier slaughter than had been seen at Marathon signalized the conflicts of Greeks and Persians at Artemisium, Salamis, Plataea, and the Eurymedon. But mighty and momentous as these battles were, they rank not with Marathon in importance.

They originated no new impulse. They turned back no current of fate. They were merely confirmatory of the already existing bias which Marathon had created. The day of Marathon is the critical epoch in the history of the two nations. It broke forever the spell of Persian invincibility, which had paralyzed men’s minds. It generated among the Greeks the spirit which beat back Xerxes, and afterwards led on Xenophon, Agesilaus, and Alexander, in terrible retribution, through their Asiatic campaigns. It secured for mankind the intellectual treasures of Athens, the growth of free institutions, the liberal enlightenment of the Western world, and the gradual ascendancy for many ages of European civilization.

**I**would like to continue our discussion a while by using Fortune’s own arguments, and I would like you to consider whether her demands are just. “Why do you burden me each day, mortal man,” she asks, “with your querulous accusations? What harm have I done you? What possessions of yours have I stolen? Choose any judge you like and sue me for possession of wealth and rank, and if you can show that any part of these belongs by right to any mortal man, I will willingly concede that what you are seeking really did belong to you. When

Nature brought you forth from your mother's womb I received you naked and devoid of everything and fed you from my own resources. I was inclined to favor you, and I brought you up—and this is what makes you lose patience with me—with a measure of indulgence, surrounding you with all the splendor and affluence at my command. Now I have decided to withdraw my hand. You have been receiving a favor as one who had the use of another's possessions, and you have no right to complain as if what you have lost was fully your own. You have no cause to begin groaning at me; I have done you no violence. Wealth, honors, and the like are all under my jurisdiction. They are my servants and know their mistress. When I come, they come as well, and when I go, they leave as well. I can say with confidence that if the things whose loss you are bemoaning were really yours, you could never have lost them. Surely I am not the only one to be denied the exercise of my rights? The heavens are allowed to bring forth the bright daylight and lay it to rest in the darkness of night: the year is allowed alternately to deck the face of the earth with fruit and flowers and to disfigure it with cloud and cold. The sea is allowed either to be calm and inviting or to rage with storm-driven breakers. Shall man's insatiable greed bind me to a constancy which is alien to my ways? Inconstancy is my very essence; it is the game I never cease to play as I turn my wheel in its ever changing circle, filled with joy as I bring the top to the bottom and the bottom to the top. Yes, rise up on my wheel if you like, but don't count it an injury when by the same token you begin to fall, as the rules of the game will require. You must surely have been aware of my ways. You must have heard of Croesus, king of Lydia, who was once able to terrorize his enemy Cyrus, only to be reduced to misery and be condemned to be burnt alive: only a shower of rain saved him. And you must have heard of Æmilius Paulus and how he wept tears of pity at all the disasters that had overwhelmed his prisoner, Perses, the last king of Macedonia. Isn't this what tragedy commemorates with its tears and tumult—the overthrow of happy realms by the random strokes of Fortune? When you were a little boy, you must have heard Homer's story of the two jars standing in God's house, the one full of evil and the other of good. Now, you have had more than your share of the

good, but have I completely deserted you? Indeed, my very mutability gives you just cause to hope for better things. So you should not wear yourself out by setting your heart on living according to a law of your own in a world that is shared by everyone."

ANOTHER of the king's chief men, approving of his words and exhortations, presently added: "The present life of man, O king, seems to me, in comparison of that time which is unknown to us, like the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your commanders and ministers, and a good fire in the midst, while the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad; the sparrow, I say, flying in at one door, and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, into the dark winter from which he had emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before, or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant. If, therefore, this new doctrine contains something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed."

IT was Theuth who first invented numbers and arithmetic, geometry and astronomy, dicing, too, and the game of draughts and, most particularly and especially, writing. Now the king of the whole country at that time was Thamus, who dwelt in the great city of Upper Egypt which the Greeks call Egyptian Thebes. To him came Theuth, and revealed his arts, saying that they ought to be passed on to the Egyptians in general. Thamus asked what was the use of them all, and when Theuth explained, he condemned what he thought the bad points, and praised what he thought the good. On each art, we are told, Thamus had plenty of views both for and against; it would take too long to give them in detail. But when it came to writing, Theuth said, "Here, O king, is a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories; my discovery provides a recipe for memory and wisdom."

But the king answered and said, "O man full of arts, to one it is given to create the things of art, and to another to judge what measure of harm and

of profit they have for those that shall employ them. And so it is that you, by reason of your tender regard for the writing that is your offspring, have declared the very opposite of its true effect. If men will learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling them of many things without teaching them, you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows.”

That’s the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter’s products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you the same thing forever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally with those who have no business with it; it doesn’t know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself.

**O**F Plato’s works, the larger and more valuable portion have all one common end, which comprehends and shines through the particular purpose of each several dialogue; and this is to establish the sources, to evolve the principles, and exemplify the art of METHOD. This is the clue, without which it would be difficult to exculpate the noblest productions of the divine philosopher from the charge of being tortuous and labyrinthine in their progress, and unsatisfactory in their ostensible results. The latter indeed appear not seldom to have been drawn for the purpose of starting a new problem, rather than that of solving

the one proposed as the subject of the previous discussion.

But with the clear insight that the purpose of the writer is not so much to establish any particular truth, as to remove the obstacles, the continuance of which is preclusive of all truth; the whole scheme assumes a different aspect, and justifies itself in all its dimensions. We see, that to open anew a well of springing water, not to cleanse the stagnant tank, or fill, bucket by bucket, the leaden cistern; that the EDUCATION of the intellect, by awakening the principle and method of self-development, was his proposed object, not any specific information that can be conveyed into it from without; not to assist in storing the passive mind with the various sorts of knowledge most in request, as if the human souls were a mere repository or banquet-room, but to place it in such relations of circumstance as should gradually excite the germinal power that craves no knowledge but what it can take up into itself, what it can appropriate, and re-produce in fruits of its own. To shape, to dye, to paint over, and to mechanize the mind, he resigned, as their proper trade, to the sophists, against whom he waged open and unremitting war.

**A**S to memory, I think it should not be forgotten that just as intelligence investigates and discovers by means of division, so memory safeguards the results by bringing them together. It is necessary, then, that what we have separated in learning, we should bring together to be committed to memory. To bring together means to make a short and concise summary of those things which in writing and discussion are more prolix; this, the ancients called an “epilogue,” that is, a brief recapitulation of what has gone before. For every treatment of a subject has some beginning on which the whole truth of the matter and the power of judgment depends, and to this everything else is referred. To seek out and consider this is to bring things together. There is one fount and many rivulets; why do you follow the windings of the streams? Reach the fount and you have it all. I say this because man’s memory is sluggish, and rejoices in brevity, and if it is dispersed among many things, it does less well in particulars. We ought, then, in all learning to collect something brief and certain, which may be hidden in the secret places of the

memory, whence afterward, when it is necessary, the rest may be derived. It is necessary to repeat this often, and to recall the taste from the belly of memory to the palate, lest, by long interruption, it should fall into disuse. Therefore I beg you, reader, not to rejoice too greatly if you have read much, but if you have understood much; not that you have understood much, but that you have been able to retain it. Otherwise it is of little profit either to read or to understand.

When a certain wise man was asked what is the method and form of learning, he replied, "A humble mind, zeal for inquiry, a quiet life, silent investigation, poverty, and a foreign land: these are wont to reveal to many what is obscure in their reading." I think that he had heard the saying, "Manners adorn Knowledge," and so he joined together precepts for study and precepts for living, so that the reader may perceive both the manner of his own life and the meaning of study. Knowledge is unworthy of praise when it is stained by a shameless life. Therefore, he who seeks knowledge should take the greatest care not to neglect discipline.

THE more ignorant men are, the more convinced are they that their little parish and their little chapel is an apex to which civilization and philosophy have painfully struggled up the pyramid of time from a desert of savagery. Savagery, they think, became barbarism; barbarism became ancient civilization; ancient civilization became Pauline Christianity; Pauline Christianity became Roman Catholicism; Roman Catholicism became the Dark Ages; and the Dark Ages were finally enlightened by the Protestant instincts of the English race. The whole process is summed up as Progress with a capital P. And any elderly gentleman of Progressive temperament will testify that the improvement since he was a boy is enormous.

Now if we count the generations of Progressive elderly gentlemen since, say, Plato, and add together the successive enormous improvements to which each of them has testified, it will strike us at once as an unaccountable fact that the world, instead of having improved in 67 generations out of all recognition, presents, on the whole, a rather less dignified appearance in Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* than in Plato's *Republic*. And in truth, the

period of time covered by history is far too short to allow of any perceptible progress in the popular sense of Evolution of the Human Species. The notion that there has been any such progress since Caesar's time (less than 20 centuries) is too absurd for discussion. All the savagery, barbarism, dark ages and the rest of it which we have any record as existing in the past exists at the present moment. A British carpenter or stonemason may point out that he gets twice as much money for his labor as his father did in the same trade, and that his suburban house, with its bath, its cottage piano, its drawing room suite, and its album of photographs, would have shamed the plainness of his grandmother's. But the descendants of feudal barons, living in squalid lodgings on a salary of fifteen shillings a week instead of in castles on princely revenues, do not congratulate the world on the change. Such changes, in fact, are not to the point. It has been known, as far back as our records go, that man running wild in the woods is different from man kennelled in a city slum; that a dog seems to understand a shepherd better than a hewer of wood and drawer of water can understand an astronomer; and that breeding, gentle nurture, and luxurious food and shelter will produce a kind of man with whom the common laborer is incompatible. The same is true of horses and dogs. Now there is clearly room for great change in the world by increasing the percentage of individuals who are carefully bred and gently nurtured, even to finally making the most of every man and woman born. But that possibility existed in the days of the Hittites as much as it does today. It does not give the slightest real support to the common assumption that the civilized contemporaries of the Hittites were unlike their civilized descendants today.

This would appear the tritest commonplace if it were not that the ordinary citizen's ignorance of the past combines with his idealization of the present to mislead and flatter him. Our latest book on the new railway across Asia describes the dullness of the Siberian farmer and the vulgar pursepride of the Siberian man of business without the least consciousness that the string of contemptuous instances given might have been saved by writing simply "Farmers and provincial plutocrats in Siberia are exactly what they are in England." The latest professor descanting on the

ancient civilization of the Western Empire in the fifth century feels bound to assume, in the teeth of his own researches, that the Christian was one sort of animal and the pagan another. It might as well be assumed, as indeed it generally is assumed by implication, that a murder committed with a poisoned arrow is different from a murder committed with a Mauser rifle. All such notions are illusions. Go back to the first syllable of recorded time, and there you will find your Christian and your Pagan, your yokel and your poet, hero and helot, Don Quixote and Sancho, Tamino and Papageno, Newton and bushman unable to count to eleven, all alive and contemporaneous, and all convinced that they are the heirs of all the ages and the privileged recipients of The Truth (all others damnable heresies) just as you have them today, flourishing in countries each of which is the bravest and best that ever sprang at Heaven's command from out the azure main.

Again, there is the illusion of "increased command over Nature," meaning that cotton is cheap and that ten miles of country road on a bicycle have replaced four on foot. But even if man's increased command over Nature included any increased command over himself (the only sort of command relevant to his evolution into a higher being), the fact remains that it is only by running away from the increased command over Nature to country places where Nature is still in primitive command over Man that he can recover from the effects of the smoke, the stench, the foul air, the overcrowding, the racket, the ugliness, the dirt which the cheap cotton costs us. If manufacturing activity means Progress, the town must be more advanced than the country; and the field laborers and village artisans of today much be much less changed from the servants of job than the proletariat of London from the proletariat of Caesar's Rome. Yet the Cockney proletarian is so inferior to the village laborer that it is only by steady recruiting from the country that London is kept alive. This does not seem as if the change from Job's time were Progress in the popular sense; quite the reverse. The common stock of discoveries in physics has accumulated a little. That is all.



# What to Do till the Undertaker Comes

*A Supplement to  
The Underground Grammarian*



[This strange essay by our assistant circulation manager first appeared in, of all things, *Geophysics: THE LEADING EDGE of Exploration*. We have made a few small changes.]

I HAVE just had some exciting news about Boating Education. There are some people somewhere who believe that Boating Education should be just as regular an enterprise in the schools as Driver Education, Television Education, and Brothering and Sistering Education, all of which have won themselves places in schools all over the land.

The proponents of Boating Education make a strong case. What is the good, they ask, of teaching reading and writing, or even physics and calculus, if the young people thus laboriously instructed are only going to tip over their canoes and drown, or decapitate themselves by running motorboats at full throttle under docks and bridges?

A good question. And its logical implications are even more compelling than the question itself, which, unfortunately, suggests facetious analogies. We might with the same justification require that our schools provide their students with Rock Climbing Education and Burglar Alarm Education. We might even conclude, since death is even more certain than a diploma to put an end to all learning, that we ought to abandon the whole business of education, and, while waiting for death, pursue only those 'studies' that might

help us to live as long and as well as possible in the meantime.

The Boating Education enthusiasts may seem silly and all too obviously self-serving (people actually do make livings from such notions), but, given the meaning of “education” in these times, they are logically consistent and impeccably orthodox. It is our fashion, not only in our notions of education but apparently in all others, not only to consider the meaning (if there be any) of human deeds as a function of time and place, but also to reject as sentimental, and maybe superstitious, the belief, the suspicion, the fear, that human deeds have some meaning not dependent on time and place. It is an unspoken presumption of the practice of our schools that “education” is for a purpose, and that the purpose is to live in one style rather than another until we die. Whatever is conducive to the socially approved style of living is, therefore, the legitimate substance of “education”; whatever is not patently thus conducive is, at best, a harmless and perhaps even an “enriching” diversion, and, at worst, an elitist display of conspicuous consumption and leisure, and a dangerous impediment to the cultivation of socially approved, “useful” styles of living.

I do not mean to suggest that our version of education is hedonistic, although it is often cynically described as “fun and games,” and even though Boating Education might come to be ‘taught’ up a lazy river by the old mill run. It is, in fact, quite the opposite of hedonism, and characterized not by abandoned merriment but by a sanctimonious search for a place *in life*. That place, furthermore, exists only because the social order needs it, and is seen not only as an accepted way to make a living, but, at the same time, to serve some supposed needs of the social arrangement that provides us the opportunity to live. In this respect, modern educational systems do seem to vary, but only in this: while we are all expected to “serve” in some way the system that teaches us how to serve, some systems permit some of us more choice as to how we will serve, and how much pleasure and profit we may take from that service.

This is the final meaning of “life-adjustment,” a term intended both to describe and to justify that presumed education to which we are committed: it is designed to adjust us to life *as it now must be*

*lived*, in this time and in this place, and with due regard to the collective needs of the society that is said to harbor and nourish us. Thus it is that what we call “education,” once thought a condition, even a virtue, not subject to passing fashions, has come to be thought a filling of some cavity in the mind, a neutral void to be stuffed with this or that, or whatever else the ephemeral “needs” of the society may dictate. And that is why the practice of the schools must change with every real or imagined change in the texture and style of life.

Such a view of education can seem attractively reasonable. After all, we do have to live here and now. That is our most immediately obvious need, and the schooling that will fit us to do it indubitably “meets a need,” a phrase much used by those calling themselves ‘educators.’ And what could be more reasonable and salutary than an education that meets not just one but two urgent needs: the need of the individual to live this life, and the need of this life to be served? Why, when a turn of the wheel brings us a need of navigators, or silversmiths, or computer programmers, should we not “adjust” education itself accordingly? What else is there to live but life?

Why, then, are many of us troubled by what seem, well, at least failures, and sometimes no less than evil fruits, of our system of education? I think it is because we do remember some of our history. We must at least pause to reflect on the troubling fact that education, in its beginnings, and for a long time thereafter, was not in any sense an “adjustment” to the obvious needs of getting and spending, but rather a development of the powers by which we might best endure those needs. It was not a preparation for the world, but a preparation *against* the world, which will inevitably bring us pain and sorrow. And death.

The ancient Greeks, to whom we owe the very idea of education, saw no important difference between the educated person and the philosopher. To be the one was to be the other. Nor did they equate the trained practitioner of any craft or art, however great his skill or difficult his calling, with the educated man. They would not have said, as we do, that the physician, for instance, has been educated in his art, but that he has rather been trained into it. He might, of course, *also* have been educated, as might the cobbler or the wheelwright, but not so that he could make a living.

The Greeks did not see education as a process that might culminate in the practice of a profession, or in anything else, for that matter. They saw it as an endless exploration, not a way of making a living, but a way of trying—only trying, no more—to live wisely. It is a measure of our values that we deem any powers other than those by which we make our livings either harmless diversions or elitist luxuries. For the Greeks, education was simply a necessity, not a necessity for *life*—all creatures have that—or for the happy life—*nothing* can assure that—but for the *virtuous* life, whose principles can be discovered, and whose attributes do not change with the turnings of the wheels of fashion and fortune.

Just at the end of *The Republic*, Socrates tells the mystifying little story of Er, who was mistakenly left for dead and taken, like an ancient Dante, on a tour of the Afterworld. Whether it is as a true believer or merely as one who would teach by parable that Socrates tells the tale, I can not guess, but its power as a parable is quite enough for his purposes. Er beholds the souls of the dead as they are shown new lives from which to choose, lives of every sort, humble or exalted, long or short, pleasant or nasty, rich or poor, brave or craven, even the lives of plants and animals. The souls, whose presence at the choosing is testimony to a desire for virtue, are free to choose, but must bear whatever destinies their choices bring. The good choice has nothing to do with the aims of our kind of education, promotion and pay, and what pleasures they may provide. The good choice is ‘good’ in what has become a ‘special’ sense of the word: it is the choice of a life in which the choosing soul can best seek virtue.

“And, here, my dear Glaucon,” says Socrates, “is the supreme peril of our human state; and therefore the utmost care should be taken. Let each one of us leave every other kind of knowledge and seek and follow one thing only, if peradventure he may be able to learn and discern between good and evil, and so to choose always and everywhere the better life.”

That severe and unfashionable idea of education must seem at the least idealistic and impractical to us, for the bread, after all, must be buttered. We can hardly afford to “leave every other kind of knowledge and seek and follow one thing only.” Socrates seems, furthermore, to command

something foreign and incomprehensible to us, an education not for *living*, but for *being*. We do believe that we live, but we do not take any clear meaning from the distinction between living and being. Partly for that reason, and partly because of its obvious impracticality, the education urged by Socrates just wouldn’t do in our schools, and I am not about to suggest its adoption. But I do wonder: Why is it that so many people, when brought to consider such an impractical and esoteric education, can not suppress a feeling of longing and loss, and must even think it, however irrelevant to what they suppose to be their “needs,” worthy, estimable, and somehow *better* than what we have?

But, of course, preposterous. What fools and dreamers we would seem if we said to our children, and to each other: Drop everything else and seek only to learn how to tell what is evil from what is good. Even the teachers, perhaps especially the teachers, would laugh at such an *unprofessional* notion of education. So we don’t say that. We say instead: Study Boating Education so that you won’t drown and thus fail to live comfortably while also serving the needs of the society that provides you with practical skills like Boating Education. And that, of course, is not thought preposterous.

I will not recite here yet another list of the many, and always multiplying, preposterous things that we do in the name of education. Any reader can, if only from sad experience, make such a list. I will only suggest that they all may be expressions of one pervasive ideology, all variations on an unstated theme. The Boating Education enthusiasts and their ilk bob up and down on the tide of that theme. What good is anything, they ask, except what we can do while we live? All our “needs,” they say, can be defined by what lies outside of us, the world and its ways, to which we must be fitted. The aim of education, therefore, is to fashion us into components compatible with the great system into which we must be plugged, where we “may operate” as effectively as possible until we wear out, when we can easily be replaced by other, and even better, “state of the art” components. And even those few remaining elements of our “education” that do not contribute directly to our componentship, now collected in the disorderly jumble called “general” education, are justified only because they might

“enrich” our leisure, and make us feel better, and so contribute to better “performance” as well as satisfaction and self-esteem. It is an education *pro tem*, an education that sees no destiny but death, an education in which all human understandings once thought incorruptible have put on the corruption of change and decay.

The education that Socrates commended to Glaucon was not, in any modern sense of the word, “religious,” and certainly not churchly, for Socrates knew nothing of what we call “church.” In fact, the inquiry that he urges, the lifelong questioning of good and evil, is not the chosen task of churches, any one of which can easily recite numerous and invariable rules that will put an end to all questioning of good and evil. In that respect, the church is not different from the school; in the one, questions about good and evil, and in the other, questions about relevance and irrelevance, are routinely settled by “information.” We must not imagine that what some churches now propose in their squabble with the schools would be a remedy. Should they have their way, we would have what we have now, except that some unquestioned presuppositions would change. It is important to keep that in mind, for I now have to say something about education according to Socrates that makes it sound “religious”: That education was neither the learning of skills nor the acquiring of knowledge, however worthy *and necessary* those things surely were, but the process of growth in the soul. Our educational devisers have concluded that there is no such thing as a soul.

This is what makes it so difficult—probably impossible—ever to win any battles with the educationists. If we oppose them in detail, they can always retreat, if they have to, into tinkering and adjustment through “innovative thrusts,” which always thrust us away from education. If we oppose them in principle, we have to sound like zany metaphysicians ranting against an age of scientific “certainties,” and speaking in categories about which *professional* educationists have generated no findings, not even a parameter. Having proved myself an amateur by speaking of good and evil, I now do worse and speak of the soul. Absurd. Can I really be that far behind the times? Have I never heard of Planck’s constant, or of behavior modification? Do I also believe in phrenology and flying saucers? Can I *really*

propose that education, a vast, collective, bureaucratic agency, take cognizance of the *soul*, instead of things that we *know* to exist, things like *intelligence*, and *existentiality*, and *reading readiness*, and *self-esteem*, all of which we can and *do* weigh and measure through whole batteries of standardized assessment instruments of proven effectiveness, complete with established norms for age, and place of origin, and ethnic background, as well as socio-economic? Preposterous!

Well, maybe. And yet, I am not at all convinced that the exploration of the “affective domain,” always pursued with startling incongruity through a statistical method applied to hearsay evidence from witnesses whose self-interest is inevitable and whose self-knowledge is dubitable, is somehow *less* preposterous than a consideration of the soul. And, while in considering the “affective domain” I must mingle with glib, self-satisfied functionaries, in considering the soul, I find myself in excellent company. I would rather sit with Emerson and Dostoyevski than with concocters of self-worth enhancement assessment instruments. If they see no point in sitting in such excellent company, that fact alone could be sufficient comment on education in our time. And *that* fact suggests the beginning of a prescription for education: Search out diligently the best, wondering minds, and go and sit with them. And remember as you do that, that our children sit with facilitators.

When we do sit among those best minds, we find that people we know to be “dead,” no longer “meeting current needs,” are, strangely, not dead at all. They speak to us with far greater power and effect than we can expect from most of the “living,” whatever that might mean. And it is to us that they speak; we do not merely overhear them “meeting the needs” of their time and place and forming components compatible with their systems. They had us in mind, but not in our roles as temporary life-forms subject to the necessities of time and place. It is as though, out of something that is *not* bound by time and place, they spoke to the same something in us, knowing it would be there. And it is. I do not think it preposterous to say that they spoke as souls to souls. I don’t know a better word.

Furthermore, if we *have* from time to time sat with the best, something in us is vexed and

saddened by anything less. That is how we know that it is in some deep principle and not just in a multitude of silly particulars that the way we “educate” our children is *wrong*. Except for brief meetings with the best, almost always happy accidents and seldom a provision of the “guidelines,” most of schooling is remembered as a wasteland, where there was neither power, nor passion, nor nourishment, but only, if we were lucky, skills development. Education seems a process *through* which we must pass, not a condition into which we may grow. We are usually glad to be done with it, so that we can begin to *live* the life to which schooling is a long, dull overture.

What is it in us that is thus vexed and offended? Does it not also tell us (unless that “education” has overcome us utterly) that the getting and spending, the meeting of needs and having needs met, are not enough, are not the nourishment for *the* need? Does it not trouble us, hinting that there is more, and better, than job security and comfortable retirement? Does it not hint that there is something degrading in being adjusted to a system, and something vile and tyrannical in a system that admits, no, *affirms*, that it is not likely to survive *unless* most of us are adjusted to it?

To talk of the soul is doubly embarrassing. Not only does it invite the charge of silliness, but it requires me to make, on the soul’s behalf, some demands that can never be met by a bureaucratic agency of government. The soul seeks not information, but truth; not cultural enrichment, but beauty; not citizenship education, but goodness. These things are not, and *should not* be, provided for in the official guidelines of a government agency. It is, therefore, by its *nature*, and not only by its choice, that a system of schooling can not educate.

It is, however, somewhat more by choice than by nature that it makes it difficult for education to erupt, even by accident, within its precincts. The teachers are not expected to have any special propensity for sitting among the best, wondering minds; and the “books” in the schools are ordinarily collective concoctions whose aim is to serve some social cause. Even more significantly, the best minds are very rarely invited to talk to the students, who are seldom at an appropriate level of “reading ability” anyway. Furthermore, the school people make no secret of their opinion that

going to sit among the irrelevant ancients is an empty ritual, which opinion they have easily engendered in their students. They cannot imagine that it might be otherwise, that we might go to listen with love and respect to our elders, who speak the inquiries of their minds and the meditations of their hearts from beyond the boundaries of time and place.

The churchly challengers of education have at least found the right word for it: *secular*. They misconstrue the word, however, in supposing that it *distinguishes* schools from churches. Churches are just as secular as schools; both are agencies with agendas, hard at work not only in this time and place but on them. Both are adjusters of persons according to the guidelines. Those who resort to the churches will find there what children find in their schools: smooth counsellors reciting glib answers to great questions. And the best, wondering minds, for whom such questions are wellsprings of contemplation, seldom speak.

Our “education” is, therefore, dying. That is not a prophetic utterance, but only another way of describing it as secular. All institutions are dying. The time will come, if we can survive as a species, when no one will remember, or care, what we did in schools or even whether we had such things. Who, a thousand years from now, will know or care what energy and wealth we spent in moving from the self-contained classroom into the open classroom and back? How many would now remember Socrates, had he held off questioning his listeners until he could generate some findings about their comprehension levels, and their cognitive styles, learning disabilities, and occupational aptitudes? Our very science, which we love, and our soft pseudo-science, which we worship, will pass away or be changed beyond anything we can imagine, if not in a thousand years, then two. Or ten. It doesn’t matter. Only what souls have spoken to souls will endure as long as humanity lives. Unless, of course, our schools and their brand of “education” should triumph utterly.

Be of good cheer. That won’t happen. Any soul is stronger than a whole Department of Education. Schools do what they do with Death always in mind, under the rubric of What to Do till the Undertaker Comes. Souls, even the most ruthlessly adjusted, have Life in mind, and they know it when they see it. I have been there—so

have we all—when some soul, oppressed by experiential self-awareness continua, or Boating Education, finds itself spoken to, person-to-person, by one of those best, wondering minds. It knows, in that moment, not the knack of competence, minimum or maximum, not the vainglory of induced self-esteem, but joy. Such a soul does, at least for a little while, and who can hope for more in our times, “leave every other kind of knowledge and follow one thing only.” It finds a purity of heart and mind never achieved in Boating Education, or even in interpersonal relating enhancement role-playing.

There is no counting the sad things we do in the name of education, nor would the counting be sufficient indictment. They are, after all, mostly trivial nuisances committed by little people who *do* mean well but don’t know what “well” *means*. It’s almost as though a curse were laid upon the whole enterprise of schooling. Twist and dodge as it will, it never comes up with anything but new nuisances. But a curse is even harder to believe in than the soul; a more reasonable explanation might be sin. Our education commits us utterly to this world until we die and lose our entitlements. We quest not after virtue, but after maximized potentials and safe boating. We have accepted death and fallen into despair. And despair, some say, is the unforgivable sin, since it precludes even the *hope* of learning “to discern between good and evil.” And if *that* is so, then our “education” will not only die, but will be damned as well. And to that, amen.



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