

Emblems of Unbearable Disappointment



APOPHASIS



On a certian kind of failure.
By Glenn Wallis

IS IT AN OMEN OF THE EXHIBIT'S LACK OF SUCCESS, indeed of William Blake's constitutional unworldliness, that the *Descriptive Catalogue* he has printed for the occasion is missing a crucial piece of information: the address? The address! So Blake himself scrawls it on the front page of each individual catalogue: "At No. 28 Corner of Broad Street - Golden Square" in the Soho district of London. This is where his brother, James, has his shabby haberdasher's shop. According to one visitor to the exhibit, the diarist Henry Crabb Robinson, after taking the one shilling entry fee at the door, James Blake escorts visitors upstairs to the small exhibition room where his brother's weird paintings are lurking. When I first read about this unlikely location for an exhibit of fine art, it brought to mind Van Gogh's exhibition in a dirty run-down café where a person, the artist wrote in a letter, could "ruin oneself, go mad, or commit a crime." Blake ruins himself.

Or does he?

Up to the day of his death, William Blake was regarded as an inconsequential dabbler who produced but “irregular eccentricity, a madman’s scrawls,” as he himself summed up his lifelong reputation as a painter and poet. So, of course, in the formative years of my own development as an aspiring creator, William Blake was my guide and inspiration. You may laugh, but from my mid-teens to mid-twenties I was in the habit of referring to Blake as my “master.” Blake’s life served me as a shining emblem of what happens when you follow the lead of your own imagination, that “self-devoting genius,” as



Blake puts it. My life was galvanized by Blake's response to being condemned to artistic "failure" by the institutions of his day. Partly, his response was to keep going. But surely there is more to it than mere perseverance in the face of indifference. Today, according to the very institutions that rejected Blake — institutions that he despised for reasons much more penetrating than his own rejection — he is the ingenious visionary painter, the endlessly innovative illustrator, the inventive engraver, master colorist, and virtuoso poet. But in certain crucial respects Blake remains a failure, a profound failure, even. And therein lies his value to me as an emblem.

The story of William Blake's one and only public exhibition is deeply revealing of Blake as an emblem of the struggle that concerns me here. The story goes like this. Blake approaches a publisher with an idea for an edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that includes his own engravings. "A capital idea!" says the publisher. A contract is written up, and the project proceeds. The publisher, checking in on Blake's progress now and then, slowly realizes, "hmm, this Blake fellow's work is pretty damned weird; indeed, he is clearly incapable of producing anything that will appeal to the book-buying public." So the publisher steals Blake's general conception and hires a more commerce-savvy engraver to execute it. Cheated out of his contract, Blake, already feeling "effectually excluded" from the Royal Academy, the mecca of British art, determines it "necessary that I should exhibit to the Public, in an Exhibition of my own." It will be his coming out party as an artist. The public will see for themselves

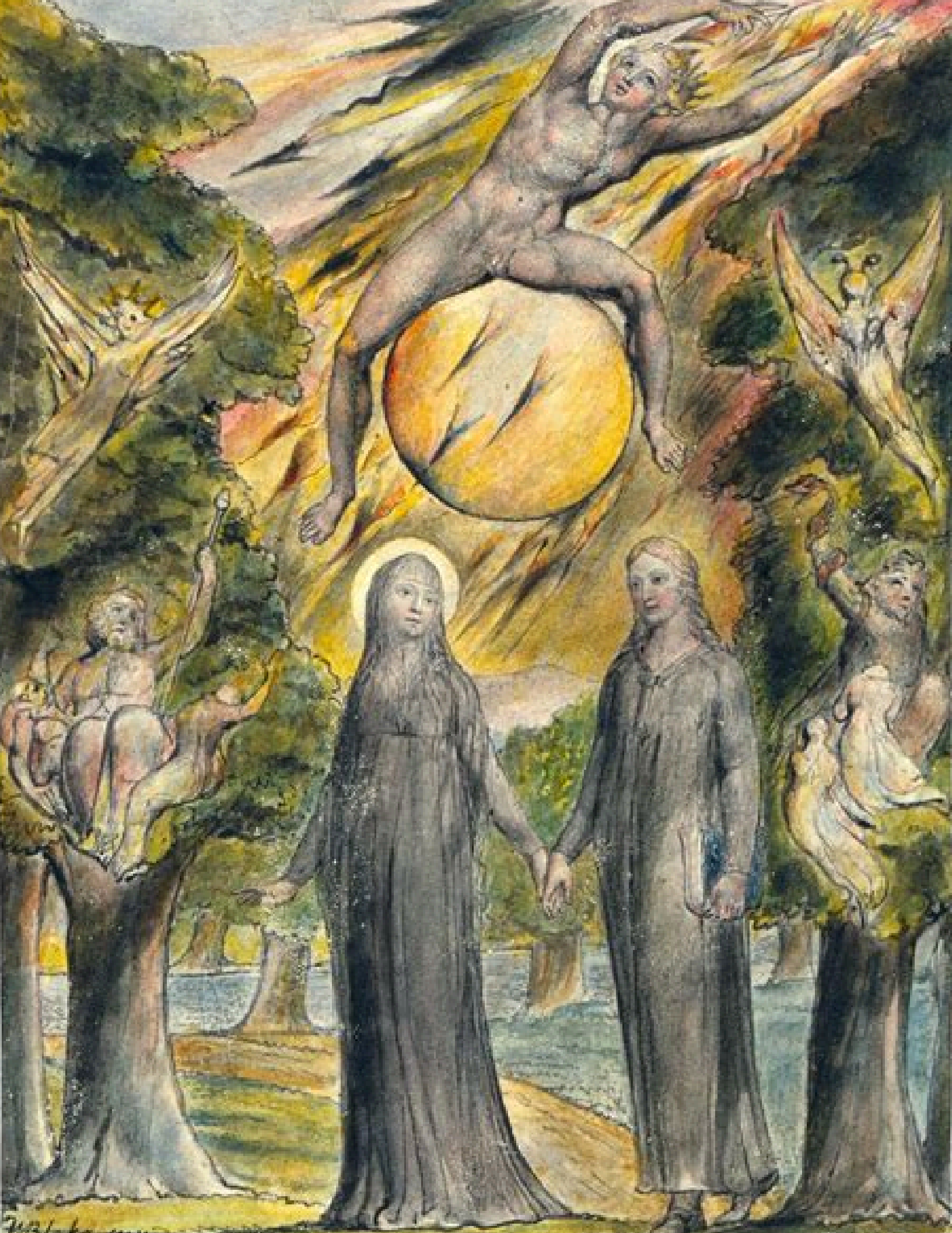
the high value of his “artistic inventions.”

My memory from the several biographies I’ve read is that only one person shows up to Blake’s exhibit. And that person deems it “a dead failure.” But maybe people do attend, but poorly, and maybe there is only one review, and that in the September 17, 1809 edition of *The Examiner*. The art critic who writes that review, Robert Hunt, calls Blake “an unfortunate lunatic, whose personal inoffensiveness secures him from confinement,” and pronounces Blake’s art “wretched...blotted and blurred.” The mad artist’s *Descriptive Catalogue*, he continues, is but “a farrago of nonsense, unintelligibleness, and egregious vanity, the wild effusions of a distempered brain.” A more recent catalogue, that of the Tate in London in 2019, calls Hunt’s article “a review so cruel and insulting that it would surely be actionable today.” Blake’s concluding remark in his own catalogue suggests that he was prepared for such an outcome: the artist, he writes, knows he is master of his art so that “if he is not employed, he will employ himself.” Indeed, regarding both the critical reception and sales, the exhibition was an unmitigated disaster. Blake’s disappointment was unbearable, his alienation from the art world absolute. After the exhibition, Blake writes to a friend, “I am hid,” falling into the obscurity that marks the remainder of his life. What, in all of this, could I possibly find — what is even the word? — useful, heartening, inspiring? The short answer is: Blake’s very example. But this answer only elicits the same question once again. I will expand a bit; but I’m afraid that the real answer can only be gleaned from this entire text, if at all.

Blake devoted himself to a vision. The vision was neither occult nor unique. Blake employed the charged language of vision when you talked to him, but he was never the type to put on airs of superiority. John Linnell was an artist who visited Blake on several occasions. Of his supposed mad hallucinations, Linnell wrote, “Blake would occasionally explain, unasked, how he believed that both Varley [another artist visitor] and I could see the same visions as he saw — making it evident to me that Blake claimed the possession of some powers, only in a greater degree, that all men possessed, and which they undervalued in themselves, and lost through love of sordid pursuits, pride, vanity, and the unrighteous Mammon.” Because Blake did not undervalue the vision, it inspired in him a vibrancy of life, fullness of imagination, and artistic inventiveness not even conceivable to the “Hirelings in the Camp, the Court, & the University” by whom he found himself surrounded. He tried to share his vision with others in the form of artistic productions, but no one ever troubled to buy any of his paintings or read any of his poems. Even in the face of ridicule and neglect, Blake worked. And worked. And worked. Read a biography of Blake and on every page you will find him working — working to record his vision in poetry and painting, working to invent new engraving techniques, working to pay his and his wife Catherine’s rent and to put food on their table. But to be clear, it is not Blake’s brute working that makes me shudder.



Prisons are built with stones of Law,
Brothels with bricks of Religion.
The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.
The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.
The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God.
The nakedness of woman is the work of God.





It is his laboring at the Edge, just before the abyss,
An abyss with indifference as its nimbus dull.
It is that he Threw roses there, into the abyss, and said:
Here is my thanks to the monster who failed to devour me.







SHE WAS THE NINTH CHILD BORN TO AN IMPOVERISHED MINER and a clothing mender in the Lavant Valley of Austria. The disfiguring scrofula with which she was born was severe. Her chest, neck, and face were covered in swollen discolored masses that scarred her for life. Because of her condition, which included near blindness and frequent pneumonia, the doctors pronounced the infant “nonviable.” They waited for her to die, but she didn’t die. Not yet.

Her father nearly went deaf from the explosions. When the doctors made him quit the mine, he struggled to find menial day jobs around the valley. The family plummeted deeper into abjection.

As a child, she spent most of her days bedridden. It was from her sickbed that she received two “treasures.” The first treasure was a mirror. It hung in the room directly across from her bed on a wall straight ahead. She would lay gazing into the mirror, beholding her reflection. Fantasies and dreams of a bright future arose over long like specters out of her reverie. The second treasure was conversation. Her mother mended clothes. The girls and women who brought their family’s clothes for mending would sit with her mother while she worked. She could hear them speaking. Hour after hour she heard tales of infidelity, violence, abortion and miscarriage, death, injustice, suicide, and financial hardship. In the image of this sickbed lies a tidy symbol of the future poet’s art. It is in the epigraph to this meditation. The mirror sets ablaze her imagination. The conversations set ablaze her emotions. Solar storms of energy cascade in fireballs thenceforth from her tiny, frail body and into her poetic creations. She discovers a terrifying strength in this energy.

Say the word and I will pound
a flower out of concrete,
for I have become powerful through
weakness and from senseless waiting,
magnets in all my senses.*

And this energy is tearing me apart. Out of her rending potency she gains a precarious confidence to confront the God of her Catholic faith, if we can call it that. But she is no pious Martha or Mary. She knows better. This is another damning treasure from her sickbed. She comes to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God, who has the power to heal her yet, and though endlessly demanding of her, remains absent and indifferent. God is a tyrannical monster. "Even as a child, I never trusted you/Because my ears never heard you." Still, she speaks constantly to God.

If I could do that for which you torment me
I would have hindered the loss of my refuge
and would certainly never have fallen
into the rackwheel of your persecution.
You should reconnect my bones,
place my heart and brain back where they belong
before – Oh Lord – you receive my gentle confession.

* *All translations the author's.*



The Lavant Valley, Austria

Finding her only solace in solitary walks through the breathtaking countryside of the Lavant Valley of the Austrian Alps, the sickly, scorned, nonviable Christine Thonhauser becomes the poet Christine Lavant.

Christine Lavant's childhood was wrapped in love. Until his death at age thirty-seven, her father was gentle and kind towards her. Until her death at age thirty-eight, her mother adored her. The six siblings who survived childhood treated her like a princess. And so when she finally wandered off into the world as a primary school student, she was in for a horrible, horrible shock. From the very first day, the other children tormented her. On good days they treated her like a contagion to be avoided, and shunned her as a pariah. On bad days they mocked her, called her an ugly freak, and threw stones at her.

When Christine Lavant was sixteen years old she checked herself into the Klagenfurt sanatorium for depression. A doctor discerned her literary talent and subsequently supported the publication of her work. The depressions never ceased. In 1939 she burned everything she had written. She "fell silent," she says, because she feared being rounded up for the Aktion T4 program. This was the Nazi "mercy" program of mass murder of people who were "unworthy of life" — children and adults with physical and mental disabilities.

She picked up her work again in 1945. What about that work? Although she won

the Grand Austrian State Prize for literature and twice won the prestigious Georg Trakl Prize for poetry, Christine Lavant (1915-1973) remains virtually unknown outside of her native Austria. Indeed, she remains largely unknown in the German-speaking world. Perhaps her narrow recognition has something to do with the fact that she shunned the literary world. So it shunned her. This *einfache Kräuterfrau* (simple herb woman) and *graue Kirchenmaus* (gray church mouse) whose poems had more in common with the roots and stones of the valley than with the likes of Ingeborg Bachmann, Thomas Bernhard, Ilse Aichinger, and the entire Gruppe 47, glamorous darlings all of Vienna and Berlin. Maybe another reason for her scant public recognition is the fact that Lavant's work is saturated by the tension wrought by a life of suffering and loneliness that most of us prefer not to behold. And yet, behold it, and her work is pervaded by a mystical serenity. In direct, terse, and beautifully evocative language, yes, Lavant writes about what she experienced most: damaged childhood, suffering women, poverty, social isolation, illness, and small-minded bigotry. She said her work is "a mutilated life, a sin against the spirit, unpardonable." Is that the reason Christine Lavant's language brims with the coruscating power of the creative will to craft art out of life's relentless brutality and unbearable disappointment?

[Amber is the Earth's Blood]

Amber is the earth's blood,
poppy sap seeps out of every kind of joy
in time, in the eternally green garden
grows the apple that I will pick.
Beforehand, through overly glazed hours
I must transplant into your heart
melancholy and wormwood
while stars dance through midday
unbinding the hunger in us.
By the wasp and hornet nests
my thoughts steal a few wild honeycombs
so that you and I may have some bread,
and the earth bleeds yellow like yesterday.
Drink with me from all kinds of joy!
Now, melancholy and wormwood grow on their
own, the apple too is turning ever more yellow,
when it is ripe, death will stand in the garden.
Oh, we will eat with ecstasy
death and apple and the black seed –
yet the fire of our hunger stars
will redden and spawn the earth's blood.

[Say the word and I will pound]

Say the word and I will pound
a flower out of concrete,
for I have become powerful through weakness
and from senseless waiting,
magnets in all my senses.
Of course you will have to appear!
The air shivers over the train station,
and the flock of pigeons expects
the irruption of great joy.
The light has lain itself gently on the tracks away
from the hair of girls
and out of the sight of men.
I have stopped crying,
stopped, too, waiting for the miracle,
for one transpires perpetually
in the increase of my weakness,
the one that rises and rises beyond the pigeons
and down into the black springs
where still visible during the day
are hidden stars.
Down there day and night do not change, down
there you still desire unendingly
the soft flower of my will.

[Leaving my mood in the hands of the moon]

Leaving my mood in the hands of the moon
brings me no closer to the solution.
I have until the roosters' glassy wakeup call
to obtain the key to all dreams.
I will abandon the boat
and go over the waters of heaven
past the islands of stars
and the refuge of angels.
I gave away my wings
to the lioness of my weakness.
She will preserve for me the desert
and the well of dances
until I return with my key
and know the warning and instructions.
The roosters have not yet awoken my heart.
Woe is me if their glassy call
sacrifices the lamb for me
prematurely and senselessly.

[Try to blow the shrunken moon]

Try to blow the shrunken moon
out of the sky.
You no longer have the breath even for that!
So how will you make the raging sun
cooler above your heart
much less knock it off its course?
Tell your heart that sooner or later
every witch must burn.
Not even the good ones escape the fire
because God needs their magical ashes
to anoint his chosen ones.
Say that he does not hate these ashes because,
in spite of everything, they come from
innocence and many mastered sufferings.
Teach, as you now take a breath,
your heart to step in the middle of the sun
and expunge fully from your blood
the name of hell.
No one believes a word you say –
and that which burns you
alone knows its own great name,
which is more devastating than all signs in
heaven.

[Broken by your sun]

Broken by your sun
broken by your moon
and flung into the shards of stars –
what is it that you want me to confess?
My bridegroom was without a horse's hoof
we never lifted ourselves above the earth,
above the valley of tears
never discussed your thunderstorms.
If I could do that for which you torment me
I would have hindered the loss of my refuge
and would certainly never have fallen
into the rackwheel of your persecution.
You should reconnect my bones,
place my heart and brain back where they belong
before – Oh Lord – you receive my gentle confession.

[The sun's wheel passed over me]

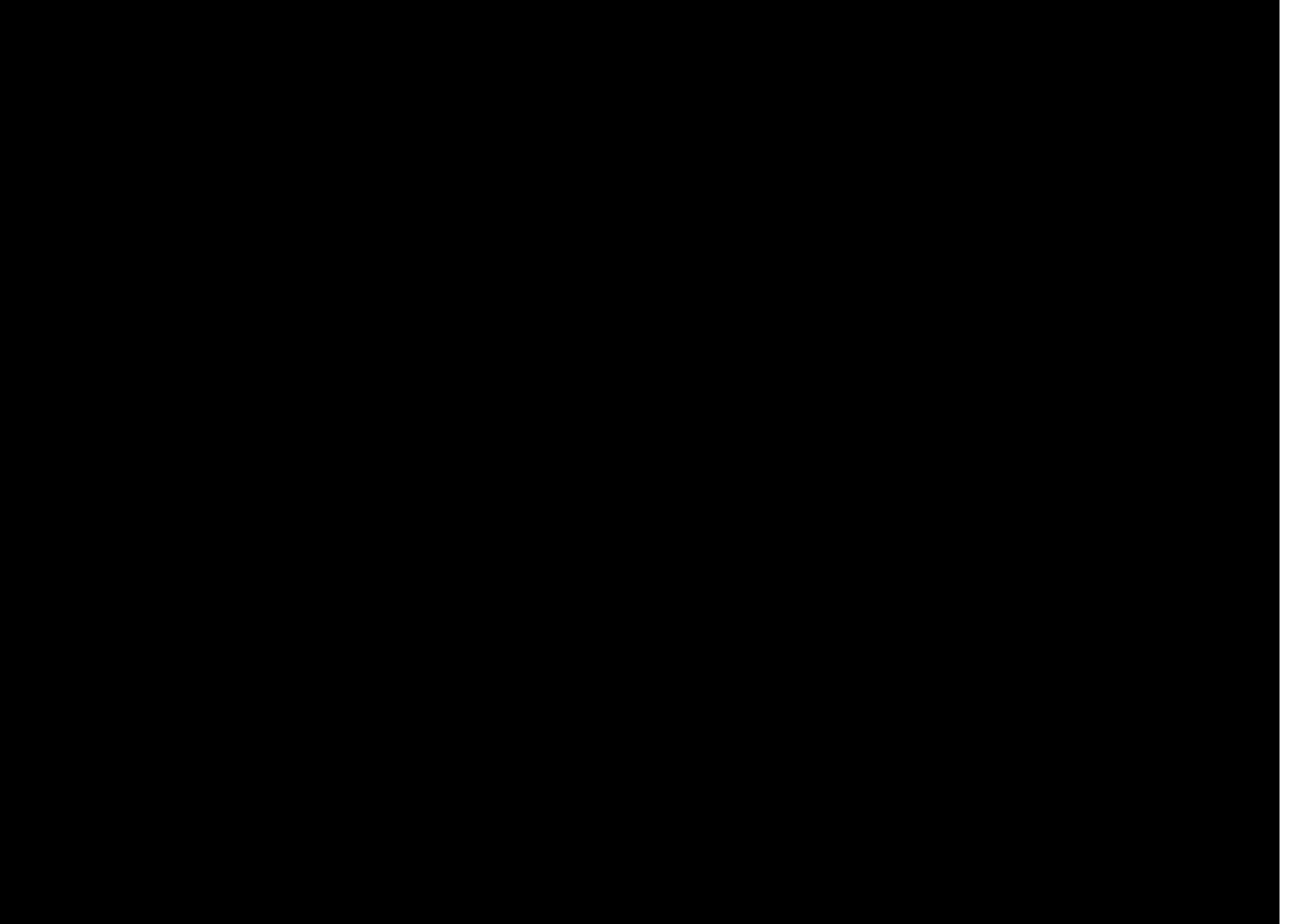
The sun's wheel passed over me,
I lie immersed in the tulip chalice of night
and count the yellow stamens of the stars,
among which one clearly bows down.
The others remain, and I fall asleep
only to behold in a dream the godly number,
to sense before it which word it intends
before it is extinguished by the hand of the
father. Perhaps an early bird wakes me
and the banana moon hangs overly tender
and ever-dwindling in the apple green sky?
Then number and sense will fall from my mind.
Then the toil of this dream was in vain.
The dark tulip slowly blossoms
and has the morningstar question my heart
how far it came before the bird shrieked.
Oh, same old answer – still just as shy shy –
I was in the forecourt – someone looked at me –
the number was large, in which I recognized
myself as black stamen in a red chalice.



[Permit me to be sad]

Permit me to be sad
under your eyes, the stars.
Perhaps you do not see that I am sad
for the moon's shell has turned away
and pays no attention to what I say.
The sun certainly never worries its
head about me as I become twilight
throughout the day —
permit me to become completely lost
in the bushes of melancholy.







I dreaded that first Robin, so,
But He is mastered, now,
I'm some accustomed to Him grown,
He hurts a little, though—

A QUEASINESS COMES OVER ME at the very thought of describing my feeling of kinship toward Emily Dickinson. Something about it feels embarrassing. Is it enough to say I wish I could know her? No, “wish” is the wrong word. It is not a wish. It is the pang of nostalgia that I mentioned earlier, that Welsh word *hiraeth*, a pained longing for a relationship that never existed and never will.

When she sends three of her poems to the writer Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily Dickinson is not angling for publication. (Or is she?) She only wants to know if, for him, her “Verse is alive,” whether “it breathed.” She asks only that Higginson says “what is true” regarding the four poems she encloses in her letter.

She was right to be suspicious of publication. When Higginson broaches the subject, she writes, “I smile when you suggest that I delay ‘to publish’ — that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin.” When, without her permission, several poems are published, she is dismayed at how their transformation from Dickinsonian idiosyncrasy to Victorian normalcy — regarding diction, capitalization, punctuation, and those destabilizing dashes at the end of lines — “robbed” them of their life blood. Is she describing her own experience or the condition of her poem as a “little white moth fluttering helplessly” when she sees it has been published (again without her permission)? In any case, she prefers “Barefoot-Rank” and being a “Nobody” to being embarrassingly hailed by the same public that gushes over the likes of the Longfellows and Lowells of her day. Where the lines of those poets are regular, singsongy, wholly predictable, her

lines are jagged, fractured, “slant,” and weird. Where those poets are moralizing, didactic, and uplifting, she is ambiguous, dark, and doubting. We have only to consult the changes that editors made to her poems, including the first extensive collections after her death, to realize that she was justified in abhorring publication. The lengths these editors went through to turn her wild elixir into anodyne is infuriating to me.

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—
Untouched by Morning—
and untouched by Noon—
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection—
Rafter of Satin—and Roof of Stone—

is rendered respectable thus:

Safe in their alabaster chambers,
Untouched by morning and untouched by noon,
The meek members of the resurrection lie,
Rafter of satin, and roof of stone.

Indeed, it is not untrue:

Publication — is the Auction

Of the Mind of Man —

Poverty — be justifying

For so foul a thing.

And so she resolves that “My Business is Circumference — An ignorance, not of Customs, but of the thing that is not revealed.” Not only does the poetic subject, through its opaqueness and slant suggestion, remain ultimately unrevealed, so does Emily Dickinson.

But should we take this master of slant speech at her straight word? Consider: Dickinson sends forty poems to Samuel Bowles. Yes, he is an old family friend. Is it a coincidence that he also happens to be the editor-in-chief of the *Springfield Republican*, a prominent New England newspaper, one that, by the way, publishes poetry? “If fame belonged to me,” she writes in a letter to Higginson, “I could not escape her.” Is she just being a coy Puritan woman, for whom seeking attention is considered poor taste? Or is she aiming at something higher than mere fame? Is she aiming at posterity? Yes, she cannot enjoy the praise that comes with fame. But neither can she feel its sting nor suffer its flying away.

Fame is a bee.

It has a song—

It has a sting—

Ah, too, it has a wing.

Did she not lovingly preserve her 1,789 poems in meticulously prepared hand-sewn booklets strategically placed in a drawer that sister Lavenia was sure to check after her death?

Is what Dickinson produces and preserves even *poetry*? She writes Higginson that “Two Editors of Journals came to his Father's House, this winter- and asked me for my Mind-and when I asked them ‘Why,’ they said I was penurious - and they, would use it for the World -.” Certainly, these editors requested her poems, not her mind, for their publications! When she sends her “Mind” next door to Sue she includes a note, “I send you a thought — gone to print.” What a fascinating notion, a thought caught like a buzzing bee and then rendered on paper with pen and ink. Of that particular Thought to Sue, at least, we don’t have to wonder, “Is it oblivion or absorption when things pass from our minds?”

No one seems to know why Emily Dickinson becomes a recluse, consigned first to the Homestead, her family house, and then to her bedroom on the second floor. It was around the time of this shift that she says “I had a terror — since September — I

I sometimes have
 almost grand
 language - was
 done out of
 us - ~~the~~ ¹⁰⁰

~~9~~ ¹⁰⁰ Dear, I accept
 for ~~me~~ - then
 words, glowing
 so full on, like
 a shining
 beam - the love
 of which Chi
 mine dream

could tell to none — and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground — because he is afraid —” but who can make out exactly what that means? Talk about telling it slant! She takes to wearing a white garment of some sort. In one of the several biographies he devours the author speculates that Dickinson was basically walking around in her white underwear to ensure with absolute certainty that she was wholly unfit for “society.” If this is true it is delicious. Many of the good citizens of Amherst would agree with Emily Dickinson’s self-assessment: “Cracked.”

As complex as her relationships to adults were, Dickinson seemed genuinely at ease with children and compassionate toward animals. As a woman in 1932, Martha, her niece and neighbor “a hedge away,” writes an account of her aunt with the telling title *Emily Dickinson Face to Face*. In it, Martha gives a vivid picture of Dickinson as relaxed and accessible to Martha and her siblings and friends. In the eyes of the neighbor children “Aunt Emily stood for indulgence,” lowering cookies and cakes and apples down with a rope from the second floor to the naughty kids below who were not supposed to eat sweets before dinner. Martha and her aunt would snuggle in bed as Dickinson would elicit the latest teenage gossip and news about fashion and the latest books. Once, when Martha returned from a party, Aunt Emily excitedly says, “so, tell me about all the fun.” When Martha hesitates, Dickinson says, “Ah, I see; coroners verdict: *Dead*.” And when Aunt Emily’s Newfoundland dog of sixteen years, Carlo, dies, she writes heartbroken to Higginson:

Carlo died—

E. Dickinson.

Would you instruct me now?

Emily Dickinson mentions animals in some 700 poems. All sorts of birds (sparrows, doves, crows, bluebirds, owls) appear, along with so many varieties of butterflies, cats and dogs, mice and bees and beetles, horses, fish, rabbits, cows, buffaloes, gnats, snakes, squirrels, worms, grasshoppers, and many more. Animals are always imbued with deep symbolic emotional depth and character. One scholar, discussing Dickinson's presentation of profound interspecies bonds goes so far as to speak of her "humanimal poetics," something so unique to the poet as to require a neologism. When Higginson inquires into her "companions," she replies: "Hills-Sir-and the Sundown-and a Dog-large as myself, that my Father bought me-They are better than Beings-because they know-but do not tell-"

How do most people live without any thoughts?
There are many people in the world (you must
have noticed them in the street). How do they
live? How do they get the strength to put on
their clothes in the morning?

I often wonder the same thing. Don't you? What drives people on? Especially in the face of daily setbacks and disappointments, not to mention the perpetual lowering of doom — in politics, the environment, the economy, the threats of terrorism and global war, in the seemingly endless mass shootings (another “absolutely incomprehensible” one just today: two children killed and seventeen children and elderly people critically injured when a young man opened fire through a stained glass window while they were praying in the church — *in the church* — of Annunciation Catholic School). How do we get the strength?

When she expresses dismay at one's living “without thoughts,” I understand Dickinson to mean something like a poetic project. Such thoughts, such projects, allow us not so much to transcend the immediate but to imbue it with some sort of sense or, dare I say, meaning. Not in any grandiose way, just to make something out of the mundane. Maybe what I have in mind here is what Nietzsche called *sublimation*. Freud, of course, popularized this concept. But where Freud spoke of it more in terms of repression and division, Nietzsche intended it to signify a condition of expression and unification. The “thoughts” are active ingredients of the very “how do they” questions. But rather than push the thoughts down and isolate them from consciousness, we work them into a project — painting, poetry, carpentry, philosophy, jewelry making, literature, science, politics — that permits all of our drives and impulses to come together and form a life.

Emily Dickinson famously said that, for her, “the mere sense of living is joy enough.”

But don't her 1,789 poems suggest that she said one word too many?

After great pain, a formal feeling comes -
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs -
The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,'
And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?

The Feet, mechanical, go round -
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone -

This is the Hour of Lead -
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow -
First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go -

Banish Air from Air -

Divide Light if you dare -

They'll meet

While Cubes in a Drop

Or Pellets of Shape

Fit -

Films cannot annul

Odors return whole

Force Flame

And with a Blonde push

Over your impotence

Flits Steam.

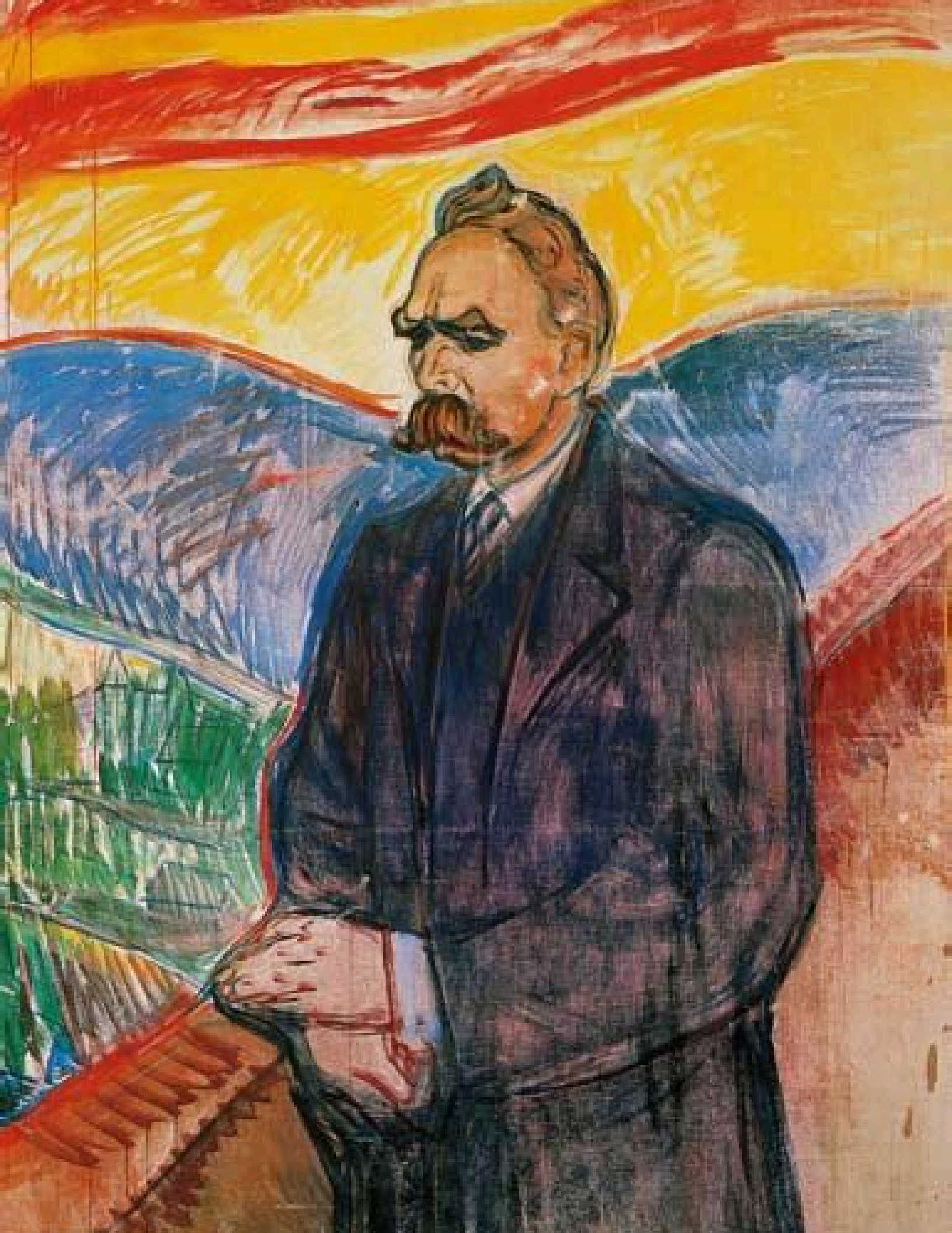
A Bird, came down the Walk -
He did not know I saw -
He bit an Angle Worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,

And then, he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass -
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass -

He glanced with rapid eyes,
That hurried all abroad -
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,
He stirred his Velvet Head. -

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers,
And rowed him softer Home -

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam,
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon,
Leap, plashless as they swim.



[How apropos of Edvard Munch to render Friedrich Nietzsche. The Norwegian Expressionists never met the Hyperborean free spirit, but he was a searching student of his work. Munch's *Scream*-like portrait was commissioned by the Swedish banker and art collector Ernest Thiel, who requested that the painting somehow expressed Nietzsche's ideas.]

FROM THE MOMENT I LAY EYES ON FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, I feel kinship. I am looking at the ink drawing that graces the purple cover of Walter Kaufmann's selected translations, *The Portable Nietzsche*. With those sad droopy puppy eyes and that massive martial mustache the picture captures something of Nietzsche's complexity. What a combination! Nietzsche, the shy introvert, knows exactly what he is doing.

The most gentle and proper man may, if he has a large mustache, sit in its shade, as it were, and feel at ease. Passersby will see him as the *accessory* of a large mustache, and say: a militaristic, cantankerous, potentially violent character — and treat him accordingly.

Nietzsche and I have been close companions since the mid-1970s. This is when I make the catalyzing acquaintance of Nietzsche's "son" *Zarathustra*. Thus *Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, as the old translation had it, is a book that I consult for every pressing issue under a teenager's too-hot sun — becoming oneself, love and relationships, rejecting the herd, the evils of institutionalized education, overcoming hindrances, and so much more. I feel personally and forcefully addressed by Zarathustra's admonishments: "I say to you: you must have chaos within to give birth to a dancing star." For me, the possibility of becoming an *Übermensch* is both real and necessary. Contrary to what seems to be the case with many other readers, I never get the impression from Nietzsche that the *Übermensch* is a Christlike cosmic singularity. Maybe I am a poor reader of Nietzsche, or a wishful one, but nothing interests me less than reading about some unique, generally unattainable class of human being. Either the *Übermensch* is possible for each

of us or it is possible for none of us — a book, indeed, *für Alle und Keinen*, for all and none. Would Nietzsche bemoan my reading? You certainly could make that case: “One like All, One for All” is, to Nietzsche, the moral sentiment that breeds the laming, homogenizing “feeling of unity with others” that favors the lesser person at the expense of the greater person. My “each or none” attitude might thus seem to lead to the individual “sandification” and mass cultural mediocritization that Nietzsche labors like Hercules (or like Sisyphus?) to reverse. But does it really, or necessarily, lead in that direction? Would Nietzsche really bemoan my reading? On both counts: no. And this is what binds me so tightly to Nietzsche. This is the main lesson that Nietzsche’s writings and, more dramatically, Nietzsche’s life, impart to me.

I cannot read Nietzsche, I realize early on, as the philosopher requests to be read — as “a monster of courage and curiosity; supple, cunning, cautious; a born adventurer and discoverer” — without learning how to distinguish between diagnosis and remedy, between description and prescription. It is Nietzsche’s *description* that society consists in people with a range from lesser to greater. And it is his *diagnosis* that this state of affairs leads to cultural decrepitude. The *Übermensch*, who possesses such *übermenschlich* qualities as honesty, solitude, courage, curiosity, and humor, is offered as a *remedy*. With these premises in place, I am prepared, as a young man, to give whatever I must to follow Zarathustra’s advice for *going under*, *crossing over*, and *rising up*. What all of this actually entails *for Nietzsche* is not yet clear to me at age seventeen. But at the time I take it to be straightforward: *going under* means immersion into my pre-rational subconscious; *crossing over* means traversing, not

averting, my present circumstances; *rising up* suggests the risk of Icarus.

When, several years later, I write my philosophy undergraduate thesis on Nietzsche's concept of the will to power, I come to know a side of Nietzsche's personality that is quite different from the, by turns, playful, mournful, silly, prophetic, occasionally adolescent Zarathustra. I am becoming acquainted with the Nietzsche who would soon feel compelled to explain, "I am no bogeyman, no moral monster." The lesson that Nietzsche imparts to me here is that it is imperative to risk being deemed by others a bogeyman and moral monster or some equivalent. Anything short of that condemnation is evidence of acquiescence to the status quo, to the already-is.

If you have the constitution of a diplomat, this claim must sound excessive. In any case, it is a terrible strategy for the kind of consensual, incremental change to which diplomacy aspires. Well, I have hardly a diplomatic bone in his body. Together with Nietzsche, I have the constitution of an insurgent. An insurgent is a person who somehow finds himself straying from "the herd" and into a wild nomadic zone that has yet to be territorialized. Take this test. If you answer "yes" to any of the following questions, you just might be a Nietzschean insurgent: "Are you a new strength and a new authority? A first motion? A self-rolling wheel? Can you also compel stars to revolve around you?" Extra credit for saying yes to the all-too-Nietzschean hyperbole at the end.

My dream, a bold sailor,
half-ship, half-hurricane,
silent as the butterfly,
impatient as the falcon:
how had it the patience
and leisure today for
world-weighting!

The greatest lesson I have learned from Nietzsche is the importance of filling the palette of my thought, speech, and action with “many colors...fifty yellows and browns and greens and reds...valuations, colors, accentuation, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations.” Will such nuancing render you a suspicious figure hiding in the shadows to those who stand on the left, the right, and the center in between? It sure will! But have I found that reputation to be worth the risk? I have.

A deeply poignant aspect haunts the epigram to this text: *Throw roses into the abyss and say: here is my thanks to the monster who failed to devour me.* It was into the abyss that Nietzsche threw his roses. Daily he offered thanks. The abyss of cold indifference and lonely obscurity — aphorism thrown after aphorism, poem after poem, book after book, letter after letter, conversation after conversation, lecture after lecture, word after word, indeed thought after thought (“Is it oblivion or absorption when things pass from our minds?” asks Nietzsche’s spiritual sister Emily Dickinson).

But of course the monster did not *fail* to devour Nietzsche. Or in thinking like this am I being too conventional in characterizing Nietzsche’s final ten years of helpless insanity as a devouring? Let’s give this question some more thought. The epigram sums up two crucial, thoroughly Nietzschean, lessons that I have tried mightily to apply to my own life. My mother once gave him a similar piece of advice, one that I

have never forgotten. “The most important thing in life is how you deal with disappointment.” She offered up this wisdom after I told her I planned to apply to Harvard. Her words hit so hard, I think, because of how profoundly clarifying they were. Her words say: disappointment in life is inevitable, indeed probably constant to some degree or another. So your response to it, and not the disappointment of failure itself, defines your response to the whole of your life.

An unrelenting theme in Nietzsche’s life is the crushing disappointment that comes from colliding perpetually with the world’s indifference. Just take the publication history of his books. From his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872, to 1894, twenty publications (some with two editions) sold 430 copies on average. For an author who believed so adamantly in the epochal value of his “roses” to humankind, 430 is a paltry number. His sales numbers were so poor, in fact, his commercial viability so doubtful, that several of his books were what we would today call “self-published.” Yes, as inconceivable as it may sound, Nietzsche had to pay for the publication of such stylistic, literary, philosophical, psychological, human masterpieces as *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Dawn*, *The Genealogy of Morality*, *The Gay Science*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Case of Wagner*, and *Human, All Too Human*. Initially, a publisher named Hermann Credner sends Nietzsche a letter agreeing to publish *Dawn*. “You have made me a wonderful offer by suggesting that I publish the second part of your *Dawn*,” writes Credner, “I am one of your greatest admirers and I have a tremendous interest in your work.” [The text is actually *Beyond Good and Evil*.

Nietzsche's original intention was that the manuscript he was giving to Credner serve as a companion to *Dawn*.) In a letter to his mother, Nietzsche expresses his joy at Credner's words.

I have a publisher, to make a long story short. As I was ready to jump into bed last night, I just happened to notice a letter that someone had slid under my door (country-like, *proper*, very proper). I read it. It was from Credner — and his announcement gave me such pleasure that, even though dressed in my nightshirt and in spite of the cold (for I have not yet heated my room), I could not help but dance around the room a bit.

Let us pause a moment to enjoy this image of Nietzsche dancing a joyful jig in his nightshirt.

Well, Credner is a hardcore businessman. Ever so slowly, the decidedly unbusiness-like, money-clumsy, unworldly Nietzsche realizes that the publisher is conniving to alter the book in several regards that will, worst of all, reduce the author's cut. Writing to Credner to advance the project proves frustrating because the publisher is unresponsive. Finally, Nietzsche blows his top.

What kind of a person are you! No response to my letters, not even whether you have received the manuscript or what you think about my condition that the printing begin immediately. I have no tolerance for sluggish business people, even less for impolite ones.

Anyone who has ever had to deal with editors, agents, project managers, and others in the publishing business will understand Nietzsche's frustration. But would they hit send? Well, let us pause once more to picture good-hearted Nietzsche reading what he wrote, deeming it unduly harsh, and tucking it away never to be sent. No one who knew Nietzsche personally failed to praise him for his grace and kindness.

With whatever words of explanation, Nietzsche pulls the book from Credner and decides to finance the publication himself from a recent monetary gift from some friends. (Nietzsche lives on a small pension from Basel University that affords him a small room and meagre meals. Using a historical inflation calculator, I calculate the amount of his pension in today's dollars to be \$34,000, the income of a grade school teaching assistant or a bottom rung food service manager.) With some 600 copies sold, a good guess is that he just broke even. Virtually everything Nietzsche publishes after 1878 requires his own financing, part or whole. And in every case sales were terrible, most books selling fewer than 100 copies in the first few years on the market. It takes seven years, for instance, for his masterpiece *Dawn* to sell a mere 65 copies.

What is the point of all this, what is the lesson, what does it have to do with my bond of affinity to Nietzsche? Well, it is Nietzsche's unswaying persistent devotion to his vision that grabs hold of me and doesn't let go. That is enough. But there is more. It is Nietzsche's devotion in the face of an equally persistent "failure" — the scare quotes alerting us to the merely worldly version of success as entailing public acknowledgement and financial gain. More still. In saying "thanks," we affirm our life before the very face of the devouring monster. The variety of affirmation I learn from Nietzsche is not the toxic phony positivity of neoliberal capitalism. For me anyway, Nietzschean affirmation is a clear-eyed yes-saying in the midst of a unrelentingly disappointing, disapproving, disappearing world. It is no small thing to be able to pronounce, as Nietzsche does one New Year's morning:

I am still alive, I am still thinking: I must continue to live for I must continue to think...I want always to learn more, to see the necessity of things as beauty: thus will I be one of those people who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: from this moment on, may it be my love! I do not want to fight a war against the ugly. I do not want to accuse, I do not even want to accuse the accuser. *Looking away* will be my sole negation! And all in all and on the whole: I just want someday to be a Yes-sayer!

Nietzsche gives me a practice for life.

Intellectual conscience.

I have the same experience over and over, and resist it anew each time. I do not want to believe it even if I can grasp it as with my hands: *the vast majority of people lack an intellectual conscience*. Yes, it has often seemed to me as if someone with such a conscience would be as lonely in the most densely populated cities as in the desert. Everyone looks at you with strange eyes and works their weighing scales as before, calling this good and that evil; nobody blushes with shame when you let it be known that their weights are underweight—nor do they respond with outrage toward you; perhaps they laugh at your doubts. What I want to say is: the vast majority of people do not consider it contemptible to believe this or that and to live accordingly *without* first becoming aware of the final and most certain reasons *for and against*, and without even troubling themselves about such reasons afterwards: even the most gifted men and the noblest women belong to this "vast majority." But what are goodheartedness, refinement, and genius to me when the person possessing these virtues tolerates lax feelings in belief and judgment, and when the *demand for certainty* is not his innermost longing and deepest necessity—as that which separates the higher human beings from the lower! I discovered in certain pious people a hatred of reason, and that was fine with me: at least this hatred betrayed their bad intellectual conscience! But to stand in the midst of this *rerum concordia discors* [discordant harmony of things] and the whole wonderful uncertainty and ambiguity of existence *without questioning*, without trembling with the longing and rapture of questioning, without at least hating the person who questions, perhaps even taking a dim delight in him—that is what I feel to be *contemptible*, and it is this feeling that I first look for in someone—some sort of foolishness keeps convincing me that every person must have this feeling, simply as a human being. That is my type of injustice. (*The Gay Science*, 1.2)

Who cares!

It is likely that because of our honesty people will misjudge us and take us for someone we are not: who cares! People will say “your honesty” – that is your devilry and nothing else! Who cares! And even if they are right! Have not all gods up to now been such demons rebaptized and made holy? And what do we ultimately know of ourselves? And what do we know what the spirit that leads us wants to be *called*? (It is a matter of names.) And what do we know of how many spirits we shelter?
(*Beyond Good and Evil*, 227)

The great health.

We new ones, nameless ones, hard to understand ones, we who are born too early for a still unproved future — we require, for a new goal, a new means, namely a new health, one that is stronger craftier rawer bolder more convivial than all types of health that have existed until now. Whoever's soul has thirsted to experience the entire range of values and desires, and to have sailed to all coasts of this ideal "inland sea" (Mediterranean), who wants to know from the adventures of their own experiences, how it feels to be a conqueror and discoverer of ideals, similarly, how it feels to be an artist, a saint, a lawgiver, a sage, a scholar, a devotee, a soothsayer, a God-hermit as of old; for that person, one matter above all is necessary, *the great health* — a health that one does not merely have, but rather also perpetually acquires, and must acquire because one constantly gives it away, must give it away! . . . And now, after we have long been underway like this, we argonauts of the ideal, braver, perhaps, than is prudent, and often enough shipwrecked and suffering damage, but, as I said, healthier than others would like to grant us, dangerously healthy, always healthy yet again — it seems to us, as if as a reward, we have before us a still undiscovered country whose boundaries no one has yet seen, a beyond from all previously existing lands and corners of the ideal, a world so abundant in that which is beautiful, strange, questionable, terrible, and divine that our curiosity as well as our thirst for possession are out of control — oh, that nothing more could sate us! How could we, after beholding such vistas and with such a ravenous appetite in our conscience for knowledge, still be satisfied with *contemporary people*? Bad enough: it is, however, unavoidable that we look on their worthiest goals and hopes with a badly maintained seriousness, or perhaps no longer even look on. A different ideal passes before us, a strange, seductive, dangerous ideal, of which we have no desire to convince anyone because we do not so easily concede anyone *the right to it*: the ideal of a spirit that naïvely, that is to say, unintentionally, and in a spirit of overflowing plentitude and potency plays with everything that until now was considered holy, good, untouchable, divine; a spirit for whom the highest, on which the people justly place their measure of value, would already mean as much as danger, decline, diminishment, or, at least, recovery, blindness, a temporary self-forgetting; the ideal of a human-overhuman [*menschlich-übermenschlichen*] being-well and wanting-to-be-well that often enough seems inhuman [*unmenschlich*], for example, when it stands next to all of the earthly seriousness heretofore, next to every solemnity in gesture, word, tone, look, morality, and task, as their most embodied involuntary parody — and with that, despite all of that, *the great seriousness* first arises, the real question mark will be placed for the first time, the destiny of the soul turns, the clock ticks forward, the tragedy *begins*. . . (*The Gay Science*, 382)

Why do we fear and hate a possible regression to barbarism? Because it would make people unhappier than they are? Oh, no! Barbarians of all times have been happier than we are: let us not deceive ourselves about that! — It is rather that our *drive to knowledge* is too strong for us to be able still value a happiness without knowledge or a happiness of a strong, firm delusion; it pains us even to imagine such conditions! The restlessness of discovery and conjecture has become as enticing and indispensable to us as *unhappy* love is to the lover: which the lover would for no price exchange for a state of indifference. — Yes, perhaps we, too, are unhappy lovers! Knowledge has transformed within us into a passion that is daunted by no sacrifice and in principle fears nothing but its own extinguishment; we sincerely believe that all of humanity, under the compulsion and suffering of *this* passion, must consider itself more elevated and comforted than before, when it had not yet overcome the envy of the coarser contentment that follows from barbarism. Perhaps humanity will even be destroyed by the passion for knowledge! — this thought, too, has no effect on us. Did Christianity ever shy away from a similar thought? Are love and death not siblings? Yes, we hate barbarism — we much prefer the demise of humankind to the decline of knowledge! And finally: if humanity is not destroyed by a *passion*, it will be destroyed by a *weakness*: which does one prefer? That is the main question. Do we want humanity's end to be in fire and light or in sand? (*Dawn*, 429)



Path to Sils Maria along Lake Silvaplana, 1890



Nietzsche's room in his "optimum," Sils Maria, Switzerland

The man with the imposing mustache and martial bearing who said he was not a man at all but dynamite and an immoralist to boot, also insisted that “without music life would be a mistake;” indeed, that he once desired to be a composer. His musical *Nachlass* contains, to varying degrees of completion, over seventy solo and duet piano pieces, chamber music, choral works, even sketches for a Mass, a Miserere, and a Christmas oratorio. Readers may also be less aware of Nietzsche’s unusual output of unusual poetry — some four hundred verses, again, in varying states of completion.



THE FIRST TIME I SAW A SELF-PORTRAIT BY GWEN JOHN I WAS STRUCK by its perfect fusion of strength and vulnerability. It's that 1900 portrait where she is wearing a Victorian-style russet blouse with a large aubergine mauve bow around her neck. In a gesture indicating her early-twentieth century "new woman" status, her hands are firmly on her hips. You see only the right hand. It is disconcerting. Seeming to come out of the darkness, with each finger alertly manning its position in case of attack — "splayed," as the current gallery description puts it — it looks more like a clawed weapon than the hand of a woman. Or is the hand holding her steady, keeping her stiffly upright? Her face has a similar ambiguity. Chin tilted ever so slightly upward, eyes gazing directly at yours, the viewer's, her face exudes self-assuredness. And yet. The delicacy of features and a wavering in her right eye suggest to me a struggle to fully embody her confidence.

She grew up motherless since the age of eight. Surely, that is a significant part of the explanation. Augusta, her mother, filled her four children's bedroom walls with the watercolors she loved to paint. She must have thus passed on the talent and the love to Gwen and her brother, Augustus.

Gwen John loved the sea. It dominated the thirteenth century harbor town of Tenby, Wales, her home. Its tides, and scents, the caw of the seagulls, the clanging of the boats' bells, the deep bellow of the foghorn, the joyous shouts of the children gathering shells resonated forever through her body. In one of the last letters she writes, we catch the spirit of *hiraeth*, the nostalgia or homesickness for something lost, that I mentioned earlier: "I long for the sea."

Art, painting and drawing, was her most valuable possession. There was no point of living without it. As a woman who came of age in the 1890s, persisting in her art required radical decisions. She sums these up: “I think if we are to do beautiful pictures, we ought to be free from family conventions and ties.” And, so, after graduating from Slade, the progressive London art school that was virtually unique in the world in accepting female students, she set off for the Continent and independence.

Landing with her friend and fellow art student Dorelia McNeill in Bordeaux, John’s plan was to follow, on foot, the river Garonne to Rome. They slept in fields under the stars and wrapped snugly in hay in the occasional barn. They ate apples, figs, and bread, and earned a little money selling drawings to villagers along the way. When they got to Toulouse they had had enough of the hardships. After a brief stay, during which John painted several deeply affecting portraits of her traveling companion, they headed for Paris. Things did not get any easier.

John worked as an artist’s model, earning so little that she continued her diet of largely figs and bread. Paris in 1904 was, of course, buzzing with the new art. Picasso, Matisse, and Brancusi all arrived in 1904. Many others soon appeared — Modigliani, Chagall, Soutine. John modelled, too, for the greatest of them all, the sculptor August Rodin. Although his studio was bustling with assistants and models and agents and buyers coming and going, John became, for a spell, his focus of erotic attention and his favorite model.

When that spell passed and Rodin ended the affair, John left Paris for a small town called Meudon, just a twelve minute train ride west of Paris. The support of a wealthy American patron enabled her to buy a cottage (often referred to as a “shack” or a “dilapidated hut”) surrounded by cedars and her beloved cats. For me, this is when things get really interesting with Gwen John.

You may ask, what could be more interesting than companionship with the leading lights of an epoch-making moment in art history, including a close friendship at this time with Rainer Maria Rilke? Dare I say *devotion*? She converts to Catholicism and begins attending the parish church. Is not God the answer to all of our questions? she wonders to her notebook. She desires to become “God’s little artist: a seer of strange beauties, a teller of harmonies, a diligent worker.” When someone chastises her for drawing parishioners during Mass from the back of the church, she retreats quite shaken to her neighbor, the great Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, for solace.

Draws during Mass. This says it all. It is true that John received communion every day. But it is equally true that she never failed to bring her sketch pad. John admits to her diary that she loves the humble parishioners as long as she doesn’t have to interact with them.



The devotion of Gwen John that interests me is not religious, but artistic. Her religion certainly played a role by bringing her a measure of peace. Practice taught her that “a picture requires ... a very long time of a quiet mind.” How to order a life that enables that time and that mind? How to arrange a life in devotion to art — this becomes her focus. She devises rules:

Do not listen to people (more than is necessary).

Do not look at people (ditto).

When you have to come into contact with people, talk as little as possible.

Perhaps certain tendencies contribute to such a seemingly harsh approach. She confides to her diary, for example, that “I should like to go and live somewhere where I meet nobody I know till I am so strong that people and things could not effect me beyond reason.” Gwen John was nothing if not deeply affected by people and things. She speaks of being unsettled by an unexpected whiff of a rose wafting through her kitchen window. Her “intolerably engrossing” affection for other people was so feverishly intense as to be disorienting. Her notebook lists “My temptations,” which, I’d guess, the rules above were devised to counter:

1. sitting before people, listening to them in an idiotic way.
2. undergoing their influence, being what they expect.
3. by fear flattering them.
4. being too much touched — valuing too much their signs of friendship, or rather responding too thoughtlessly.
5. thinking too often of people.

Once she finally sorts this all out, she has few needs. She eats very little. She sleeps very little. She spends most of her money on paint supplies. She cares for her cats. She discovers a profound sweetness to her solitude. Things get tough when her patron dies, but she persists. Although the big dealers in Paris tell her to name her price for any and all of her works, she opts for isolation and obscurity. She justifies herself to her notebook, "A beautiful life is one led, perhaps, in the shadow, but ordered and regular, harmonious. I must stay in solitude to do my work."

She did have one solo exhibit in her lifetime, at the New Chenil Galleries in London in 1926. But it received little critical attention. One person, however, recognized her talent. And this person was the largest, loudest, most sought-after artist in all of Britain. He also happened to be her brother, Augustus John. Say what you will about the flashy, bombastic Augustus John, he could give his sister the credit she deserved. In response to the critics' disregard, Augustus said that Gwen's pictures were "painfully charged with feeling, even as their neighbours are empty of it. Gwen's pictures are simply staggering." He rightfully predicted that "In fifty years' time I will be known as the brother of Gwen John."

One day, yearning for the sea, Gwen John sets out for Dieppe on the Normandy coast. She disembarks at the Gare de Dieppe, walks a half mile to the dunes, and sits down. Looking out onto her beloved sea she collapses, is taken to the hospital, dies, and is buried anonymously. Cause of death was starvation, likely from many years of malnutrition and neglect.







HE TRULY LOVED THE SUN, WHICH ROSE PURPLE IN THE HILLS,

VIRTUALLY EVERY WORD OF A GEORG TRAKL POEM EXUDES a poignant, mournful melancholy. Poetry, he said, is an “imperfect penance” for “unabsolved guilt.” And, indeed, Trakl’s poetry is suffused with a pantheistic religiosity as haunting and sublime as it is musical and vividly imagistic.

He said of the feral Kasper Hauser that He truly loved the sun, which rose purple in the hills, the forest paths, the singing blackbird, and the joy of green. But we know that Trakl speaks here of himself. And his speech is lament, and wonder. Grave was his life in the shade of the trees and pure his face. God spoke a gentle flame into his heart: Oh, mankind! What a heavy heart beats in the chest of Georg Trakl!

For years I have tried to write about Trakl. But I can’t. To do so you must fully enter his world. That’s what a Trakl poem is, a world. I don’t think I could bear to live in his world for the duration of an entire book. When Trakl says I am shadow, far from dark villages, I believe him. When he says I drank the silence of God out of the well at the grove, I listen. When he acknowledges that Cold metal kicks his head and spiders seek his heart, I realize that I must make a decision. It is indeed a light that dies in his mouth. How near must I place my ear?

Georg Trakl had good reason to whisper. We know of his incest with Grete. Their relationship haunts him. It destroys her. Grete remains a constant, spectral, presence in his life and work. The lunar voice of his sister sounds through the sacred nights of his very world, darkly hinted at, and then only in the silence that awaits us at the forest's edge of his language. Yet the sister's shadow is never distant from a Trakl poem. It even sways through the grove where bleeding heads, the dying soldiers of grotesque Grodek, lie with wild laments shattered in their mouths. It must break out, and it does:

Night looms over the bed of our kisses.
A whisper from somewhere: which of you bears the guilt?
Still quivering from the sweetness of wicked lust.
We pray: forgive us Mary, full of grace.

Trakl's agony is immense.

He barely mentions his massive consumption of drugs and alcohol. It began early. "I recall that, as a boy, he would lace his cigarettes with opium," reports his brother, Fritz. Even before the narcotics, he was a heavy smoker. When, at seventeen, he grew a fledgling mustache, it was perpetually colored with a brownish stain from the opium tincture that he rolled into his tobacco. He was often seen by school friends or, God forbid, their parents, lying in a chloroform stupor on a bench on the Kapuzinerberg, the hill that towers above Salzburg. He must have had an awful reputation for

trouble. His early tendency toward addiction can be detected in his threat to shoot himself dead if the baker didn't extend his credit for candy. Trakl loved his sugar.

Dr. Nietzsche was ecstatic when he discovered by accident that he could obtain chloral hydrate, the drug that best soothed him, from the pharmacist in Turin merely by flashing his calling card. Trakl took it one step further: he *became* a pharmacist. It was likely Gustav Müller, after all, a classmate whose father was a pharmacist, who first supplied Trakl with the drug. Another strong connection to narcotics was Trakl's affinity to the life and work of Charles Baudelaire, whose love of hashish, wine, and opium is, of course, legendary. As Dominique Iehl writes, Baudelaire was Trakl's guide 'from Romantic melancholy to a much more corrosive and dizzying form of 'time weariness.' Trakl lived out 'decay' (*Verfall*) as Baudelaire lived out 'spleen.' Both men were possessed by a feeling of hopelessness that kept alive in them a sharpened awareness of evil." And what was the master's teaching? "You have to be always drunk. That's all there is to it — it's the only way. So as not to feel the horrible burden of time that breaks your back and bends you to the earth, you have to be continually drunk. But on what? Wine, poetry or virtue, as you wish. But be drunk." By all reports, Trakl's drunkenness had the effect of relaxing his high-frequency nervous system and alleviating his paralyzing self-doubt. The bands of inhibition thus narcotically loosened, relaxation, furthermore, allowed him to enter into society. In contrast to his enslavement to "inner tension," schnapps and beer, one of his friend's reports, "cheered him up; in such moments he talked a lot and definitely did not lose his nerve and lapse into a steely silence." The insinuation is, of course, the a steely silence

was his default. Like Blake, with his sole exhibit in his brother's shop, Trakl gave only one reading his entire life. This was on Wednesday evening at 7 o'clock, December 10, 1913 at the Musiksalles on Vienna's grand Museumstrasse. The reviews were mixed. On the one hand, Trakl's person, and his speaking voice, made a shabby impression. He stood hunched over, appearing out of place and a bit miserable, and mumbled barely audible syllables. "Unfortunately, the poet read faintly, as if out of hidden depths," said one reviewer. But maybe the poet was giving his lines — *It is a stubble field where black rain falls/It is a brown tree that stands alone/It is a hissing wind that encircles empty huts/How sad this evening is* — exactly the treatment they demanded. "Monotonous incantatory talking to himself (*Insichsprechen*)," is how the organizer, Ludwig von Ficker, incorrectly quoted another reviewer. The actual statement was that the poet's utterance was some kind of: "monotonous incantatory betwixt speech (*Zwischensprachen*)." But something got through, "for this quiet person who transforms everything within himself is certainly a poet," wrote another reviewer, "what convinces one of that fact is that every one of his poems has the effect of a revelation."

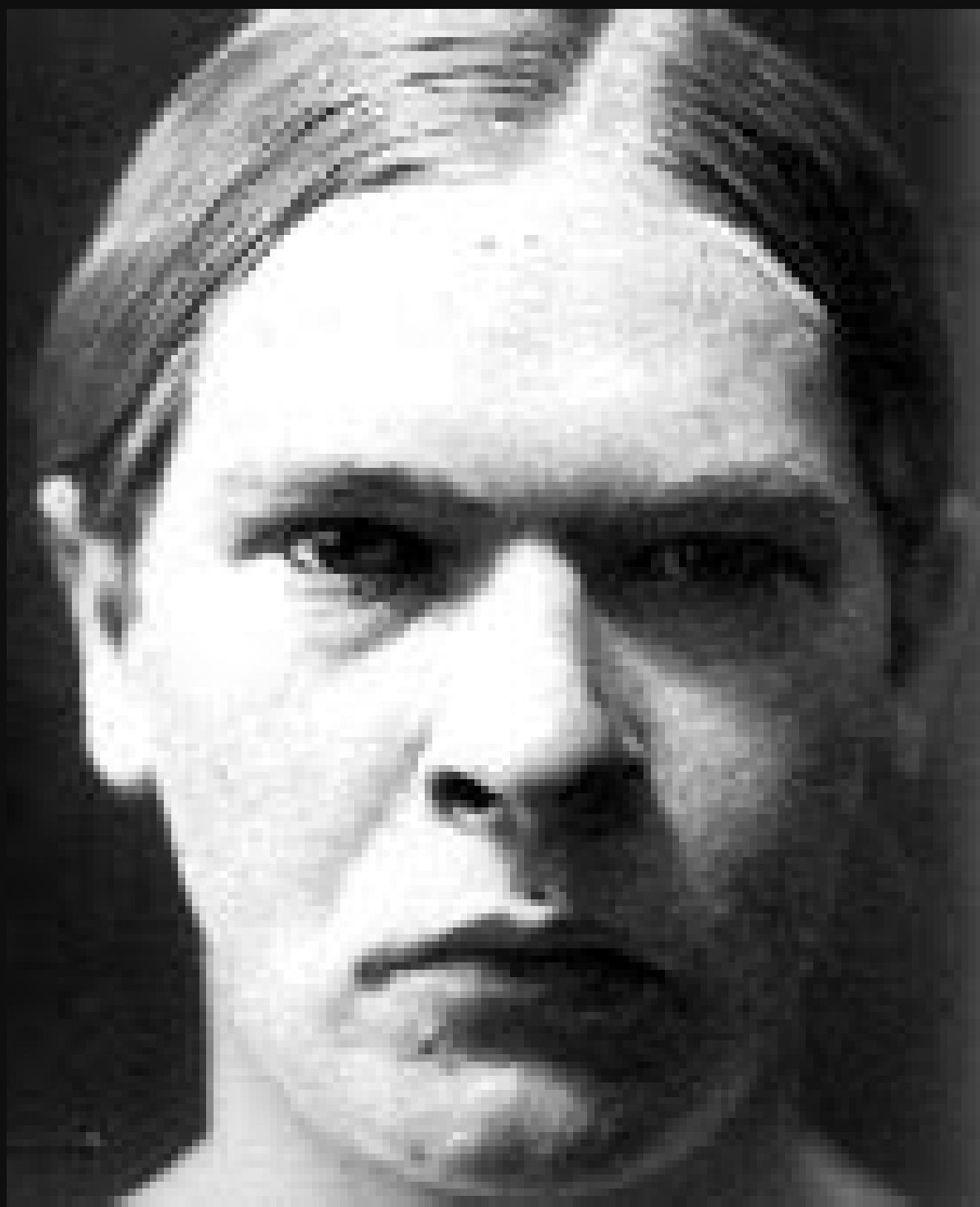
Trakl himself says nothing about the reading, only that the days that followed were full of "raging drunkenness and criminal melancholy."

Yet, it was precisely at this troubled moment that Trakl was composing one of his most sober poems, "A Winter Evening."

A Winter Evening

When snow falls against the pane,
Long sounds the evening bell.
For many is the table set.
And the house is well provisioned.
Many from their wanderings,
Come to the door on dark paths.
Golden blooms the tree of grace
Out of the earth's cool sap.
A wanderer steps silently within;
Pain turned the threshold to stone.
There, glowing in pure brightness
On the table: bread and wine.

Wer mag er gewesen sein? inquires Rilke parenthetically at the very end of a letter to the publisher of *Sebastian in a Dream* in 1915. “Who might he have been?” It is a perfectly ambiguous question, asking simultaneously, *who the hell was he*, and, *who might he have become*. In that same letter, Rilke says that his reading of Trakl left him “deeply moved, astonished, uneasy, perplexed. Another master of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein, also expressed perplexity, famously saying, “I don’t understand these poems, but their tone makes me happy. It is the tone of a true man of genius.” Wittgenstein, in fact, was on route to visit Trakl when he heard of the poet’s suicide at the now mythic age of twenty-seven. “This hit me very hard,” Wittgenstein wrote in his notebook, “How sad, how sad!!!” (Anyone who knows Wittgenstein knows how extraordinarily emotive those — not one but three! — exclamation marks are.)



Sacred Twilight

Silence at the forest's edge
Encounters a dark beast;
On the hill, evening's breeze quietly fades,
The plaint of the black bird hushes
And the gentle flutes of autumn
Fall silent in the reeds.
Drunk on poppies
You drive a black cloud
The nocturnal pond,
The starry sky.
Forever sounds the lunar voice of the
sister Through the sacred night.

Summer

At evening, the lament of the cuckoo
grows still in the woods.

The grain bows its head deeper,
the red poppy.

Black thunder threatens
above the hill.

The crickets' ancient song
dies in the field.

Leaves on the chestnut tree
no longer stir.

Your dress rustles
on the spiral stair.

The candle glows silently
in the dark room;

a silver hand
extinguished it;
windless, starless night.

Grodek

In the evening the autumn forests drone
With deadly weapons, the golden plains
And blue lakes, above them the sun
Rolls away more bleakly;
The night wraps around
Dying soldiers, the wild lament
Of their shattered mouths.
Yet in the willow meadow silently gathers
A red cloud, within which a wrathful God dwells
The spilled blood itself a lunar coolness;
All roads empty into black decay.
Under golden boughs of night and stars
Sways the sister's shadow
through the silent grove
To greet the spirits of the heroes,
the bleeding heads:
And quietly in the reeds drone
the dark flutes of autumn.
O prouder mourning! you iron altars,
The hot flame of spirit feeds
this day an immense agony,
The unborn grandchildren.

Autumn of the Lonely

Dark autumn returns, full of fruit and bounty,
Golden luster of beautiful summer days.
A pure blue emerges out of a decayed husk;
The flight of birds resounds from ancient sagas.
The wine is pressed, the mild silence filled
With the quiet answer to dark questions.
And here and there a cross on a desolate hill;
In the red forest a herd is loses its way.
A cloud wanders over the pond's mirror;
The calm gesture of the peasant is at rest.
Quietly, the blue wing of evening stirs
A roof of dry straw, the black earth.
Soon stars will nest in the brows of the weary;
A quiet humility returns to cool rooms
And angels step quietly out of the blue
Eyes of the lovers, who suffer more softly now.
The reed rustles; a skeletal horror attacks
When the thaw drips blackly from barren fields.

Kasper Hauser Song

He truly loved the sun, which rose purple in the hills,
The forest paths, the singing blackbird
And the joy of green.
Grave was his life in the shade of the trees
And pure his face.
God spoke a gentle flame into his heart:
Oh, mankind!
His step silently found the city at evening;
The dark lament of his mouth said:
I want to become a horseman.
But he was followed by bush and animal,
The house and twilight garden of white people,
And his murderer searched for him.
Spring and summer and beautiful autumn
Of the righteous one, the quiet step
Past the dark rooms of dreamers.
At night he was alone with his star;
Saw that snow fell into barren boughs
And in the dusking corridor
the shadow of the murderer.
Silver, the head of the unborn child sank.

De Profundis

It is a stubble field where black rain falls

It is a brown tree that stands alone.

It is a hissing wind that encircles empty huts

How sad this evening is.

Past the hamlet

The gentle orphan still garners sparse ears of corn.

Her eyes graze, round and golden, in the twilight

And her womb awaits the heavenly bridegroom.

On their way home

The shepherds found the sweet corpse

Decaying in the thornbush.

I am shadow, far from dark villages.

I drank the silence of God

Out of the well at the grove.

Cold metal kicks my head

Spiders seek my heart.

It is a light that dies in my mouth.

On a moor at night I found myself

Encrusted in waste and the dust of stars

In a hazel bush

Crystal angels sang out once again.

To the Boy Elis

Elis, when the thrush calls from the black forest
This is your downfall.
Your lips drink the coolness of the blue rock springs.
When your forehead quietly bleeds
Let be the ancient legends
And the dark meaning of birdsong.
But you walk with gentle steps into the night
That hangs heavy with purple grapes
And you move your arms more beautifully in the blue
A bramble bush resounds
Where your lunar eyes are
Oh, how long you have been dead, Elis.
Your body is a hyacinth,
In which a monk plunges his wax fingers.
Our silence is a black cavern
Out of which a gentle animal steps
And slowly sinks its heavy lids.
Black dew drips onto your temples,
The final gold of decayed stars.



?

WHY KEEP AT IT when no one is watching, or listening, or reading, or viewing? What animates that “why” when lack of success, recognition, and even futurity itself appear all but certain? That is the question simmering beneath the bedrock of this text. I approach the question not through aesthetic theory or psychological rumination, but through raw story, life writing. The kind of story that interests me is of a life marked by obscurity, rejection, and hardship, yet consumed by an inexorable devotional commitment to creative work. Ultimately, I suppose, this might be a text about devotion.

Although many of the names here are familiar, indeed in some cases even canonical, these are not success stories. They are stories of endurance in the face of indifference. They are stories of people who continued to work without reward, recognition, or even hope of, indeed often even desire for, either. Maybe in some cases “success” does eventually play a role, but that is the least arresting part of the story. Through these stories, *Emblems of Unbearable Disappointment* weaves a broader narrative about creative practice: what it demands, what it bestows, and why some people do not — cannot — abandon it even when it is likely that “The distant strains of triumph” will *never* “Burst agonized and clear!”

AT THE HEART OF THIS TEXT IS THE CONVICTION that the most important action, indeed the greatest gift that we can offer ourselves, is to pursue our creative vision. I believe that this statement is especially true in a time like our present moment, a time of collapse. Collapse? Do I need to make a case for collapse? Think of the *Melancholia*-like looming of environmental catastrophe, political extremism, and the stormclouds of world war. Think of the *Frankenstein*-like lumbering of Artificial Intelligence, surveillance panopticon, and posthuman plasticity. Even space and time are collapsing — into the dehumanizing phenomenon known as techno-capitalist compression. Enough. Emil Cioran is right: it is too late for arguments.

“Pursue our creative vision.” What this entails is for each individual Genius of Imagination to determine. Maybe you will balk at such a seemingly Romantic and privileged notion. But I would ask even the severest rationalist and the most committed champion of the oppressed: what is the alternative to such a pursuit? At what cost is one’s creative vision left dormant and unexplored? Yet, I can think of an even harder rejoinder: what’s the point? Why should we “pursue our creative vision,” having every reason to believe that what we create is drifting inexorably into the abyss which waits to be our grave and,

along the way, lacks any real world-changing potency? That fate is waiting even for the artist who “succeeds,” who reaps attention, recognition, and sales. How much more inscrutable is that “why?” when it comes to the vast, vast majority of us — those who labor in never-ending obscurity.

That why is coupled to another: Why the following figures? What is it about their lives that is worthy of exploration? It is certainly not that which we find in the all-too anodyne, celebratory literature on the subject. It is not because of their “resilience” in the face of failure or the belief that “failure is such an excellent teacher” or that “failure is the required negative space of creation.” It is certainly not because of the ultimate triumph of the artist against neglect.

What is it, then? It is the ousia, the essence, the vitalizing sap, the energetic flow, the electric pulse, the oozing potency of that “why” that is the object of the following figurations.

Where might we turn to catch the scent of this essence?

Philosophical practice would have us formulate concepts, seek definitions, offer proofs and reasoning regarding this essence. How dull. Such a practice brings to mind Theodor Adorno's riff, in "Valéry Proust Museum," on "museum" as "mausoleum." The ritual wooden bowl, say, drenched in the hopes, fears, risks, songs, beliefs, indeed all-encompassing cosmology of a living, breathing community sits stiff and leaden on a cold museum shelf as an "artifact." It is the same with definitions.

Surely, the most promising place for us to look is the lives of the creators themselves. Seeking “the reversal of the metaphysical hierarchy” Hannah Arendt, in *The Life of the Mind*, quotes the Swiss zoologist Adolf Portman: “Not what something is but how it ‘appears’ is the research problem.” Arendt, accepting this premise, offers a conclusion that I will take as the epistemological basis of my presentations. She writes, “Since we live in an *appearing* world, is it not plausible that the relevant and the meaningful in this world of ours should be located precisely on the surface?” Arendt’s “reversal of the metaphysical hierarchy” moves from the hidden absence to surface presence. The reversal requires a conscious revolt against deep-seated, atavistic human prejudices “according to which the essential lies beneath the surface, and the surface is ‘superficial.’” So I assume the primacy of the surface and the privileging of the creators’ lives.

We can take this approach one step further. In a moment we will hear William Blake insist that you, me, everyone can see the same creative visions he saw if we would but cleanse the doors of our perception. The extra step is thus nothing more than an attempt to take Blake seriously. Perhaps you have devoted, or would like to devote, your life to this “cleansing” and its aesthetic ramifications.

By considering your own life, might the *ousia* of the struggle that is the occupation of this text bubble up to the surface? Is it possible that a person who devotes herself to writing is engaged in the same activity, partakes in the same biographical *ousia*, as the writer who wins the Nobel Prize for Literature? Is it possible that this goes for all of the arts? Perhaps the key word here is “devote.”

Yes, ultimately, this is a text about devotion.

A final word. Hannah Arendt says “To be alive means to be possessed by an urge toward self-display.” I do not understand her to mean that the earth is populated by peacock-like egoists. I think she is identifying something much more primal than exhibitionist egotism. She writes, “*whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can be touched presents itself to be touched.*” Whatever does so, moreover, wants to do so not as a member of a collective or as an abstract concept such as “artist” or “creator,” but as a flesh and blood individual.

Why, again, have I selected the lives that I have? Ultimately, my own answer is this: their bearing

On this wondrous sea

Sailing silently

toward eternity strengthens me

and will, I hope,

also strengthen you on your path to artistic creation.



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