

NOTE BOOK

Initial Public Offering

A friend suggests that I should start by telling you something about this book, and I guess he's right.

So what is this book? This book is a small selection from a big stock of brief essays that I have written every day (one a day) over the course of what has come to be many years now. (Funny how remembering a standing date can make you forget the passing of the years during which you keep it.) I write and disseminate these essays on Facebook, using its little noticed "Notes" option. I also revise them there. And revise them. And revise them. And revise them. (One of the many charms of the notes function on Facebook is how it allows you to revise what you've already virtually published to your heart's content. I am put in mind of a remark a friend made about an advertisement for a Sunday brunch, which included *all the Chablis you care to enjoy*: "and then some," my friend waggishly added. My point being that the notes option on Facebook allows you to perform all the revisions you care to enjoy—and then some. (Many is the day I have mostly spent making small and large changes in the brief meditation pertaining thereto.)

I return now to the task at hand. What are these brief essays? Well probably, the easiest way to find out is to stop reading this introduction right now and go straight to the essays themselves. (After all, there is always something at least a little asinine and asymmetrical about even the most necessary introductions. At least so it has always seemed to me.)

But maybe I can and should provide a few words that might prepare you for what might otherwise seem merely strange. Let me first say a little about the form of these essays. They usually begin with a quotation, typically literary or philosophical in nature—although sometimes from some relatively recent or out-of-date biography of Eleanor Roosevelt or a handbook to Hawaiian flora and fauna or a study of Lou Kahn or a guide to Madrid or a living letter from a dead friend or something else that happens to catch my eye that day. (That said, I should say what will be apparent from even a casual glance: there are a few key texts to which these little essays, like so many homing pigeons, or callers to the heart, are forever returning. I won't burden you with listing these greatest hits, or explaining why I keep coming back to them. That, I hope, will become clear through the essays themselves.)

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These quotations are followed by what I have to say, more or less directly about them. The relation between what I talk about in the essay and the text about which I am supposedly talking may not always be as explicit as those of us accustomed to the contemporary protocols of critical responsiveness are trained to expect, but they are certainly always incited by it. They are as much incited by them as a hidden god or a powerful parent or a love or a loss that touches everything we do, often most tellingly, by not saying so, and not saying how. And they are continuously informed by them, sometimes sounding them out just by sounding like them when they seem to be talking about something completely different. (It's like the time, years ago, my mother's oldest brother told me over a picnic table in a small town, north of Spokane, that I had my mother's laugh—by which he meant that I bore her whole being.)

Following the body of the essay there is usually a footnote that echoes and expands upon the writing that has preceded it. (That footnote, by the way, bears little conspicuous resemblance to a traditional explanatory or bibliographic footnote. It consists of another very brief quotation from some book or

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song or some something else, and its relation to the text above it is often as oblique as the relation of that text to the quotation above that.)

Finally, there is (I should say there was) a photograph: a visual correlative or collage of the sentiments verbalized in the written element of the essay. (As you will see, the essays collected in book form have been for the most part shorn of those images: here I am nearing a matter I will only mention now, and consider more fully a little later—what is lost and what is gained in the work of translation from the liquidity of the Internet to the solidity of the traditional text.)

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I have arranged these notes in chronological order, largely because I couldn't think of any better way to organize them. (There are a couple of places where this won't be apparent. As you'll see, I number each note and a few times over the course of the years I've mixed up the numbering. I have a particular problem with numbers and in general everyone, sometimes, has a hard time keeping count of something over a long period of time.) In any case, as I say, these notes are arranged in chronological order. Thus, even a quick survey of what I have put together here will reveal that over the course of the last six years or so, these notes, like their author, have both changed and stayed the same. How have they stayed the same? Well, that part is pretty easy to say (though, I suspect, not always so easy to see). One way or another, with the exception of the occasional homey anecdote or homemade aphorism, most of what I have written has been a reaction to something I have read (the text set out in part or in its entirety at the beginning of the note). Here I observe the standard practice of my profession as a literary critic and my proclivity as a bookworm. (That's not so strange, right? People of all persuasions are always reacting to *something*, more or less near, more or less dear.)

How have these notes changed? That part is a little harder to describe, because there are many ways that they have changed. Let me mention just two that I think might interest you. One is quite conspicuous: Looking at what I've written

over the course of many years now, I'm struck by the different styles I've used to try to address my reader: plain and fancy, direct and indirect. And it's occurred to me as I've been reviewing some of my old attempts to reach my audience (how painful to read some of them are!) that it can be as hard to sympathize with your own old selves as it is to sympathize with anyone else. Something tells me, though, that it's important to try. (I try to remember that even when I was showing myself off, I was also trying to show something beyond me.) While it sure can't stay there, sympathy has to begin somehow in your own backyard.

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The second change I want to mention is a little more embedded, a little less visible at first glance. Do you remember how Don Quixote got his start, reading all those books about knight-errantry until he came to believe that he was a knight himself and set out on all those knight-errant-type errands to save those he saw in distress? Well, something like what happened to Don Quixote happened to me. (It happens to a lot of people, when you think about it.) Something like what happened to Don Quixote happened to me (though I'm not nearly so crazy and pretty far from chivalrous).

Over time, I have grown closer and closer in these notes to the texts that I take up in them: so much so that I have wound up mixing them more and more with stories from my own life—and yours (the adventures of heart and mind we share as citizens of a state of heart and mind whose messages are conveyed by social media ranging from the most well-preserved canons and commas to the bright lights and warp speeds of the Internet). As the years have passed, these notes have grown less and less formal expositions and explications of the texts where they get their start, and more and more emulations and extensions of them.

Here's an irony as old as the hills and as any story of introjection told in prose or rhyme: as these notes have become less detached from and more involved with the texts that brought them into being, the texts themselves have often disappeared from view, their influence most acute at their vanishing—like

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so many of the things that carry us through: like so many of the things that we carry and carry on.

All this to say that however removed they may seem from them, these are Essays in Criticism—in some familiar, though sometimes forgotten, old- and new-fashioned sense. The great ancestors of this little adventure in the essay form (Montaigne, Bacon, Johnson, De Quincey, Benjamin, Barthes, *inter alia*) always sought through their words to honor by illuminating the words of others: words that enshrine and encourage some someway brave, though somewhat frightened and fractured parts of the lives that we somehow lead, and lead together.

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The lives we lead together, sometimes in the middle of the night, or of the day, when we least feel like we're together: when we feel most separated from the lives of others, most separated from the social world that we love and wish to be loved by in return. Many of us, I suppose, have encountered children who are not our own, but thought for a moment might be—like the little boy, outside the gym fifteen years ago, who smiled and waved a little at me, as if I were late, and he had been waiting a long time for my arrival: *immediately awaking, I found myself quietly seated in my bachelor armchair, where I had fallen asleep ... [the boy] was gone forever* (Charles Lamb, "Dream Children: A Reverie"). All of us, I suppose, have encountered some form of the feeling of loneliness confessed in Lamb's bachelor essay, and sought one way or another to address that feeling, by finding some way of addressing others whom we can't, for one or another reason, face—sometimes writing across distances so long that we can't possibly expect to know for certain whom we are reaching, or even that we are reaching anyone at all. This effort to address a state of loneliness has for a long time now motivated the essay form (think of Francis Bacon writing with advice for courtiers from his position, after his banishment from the Court of James, of humiliated exile), just as it has motivated, for a long time

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now, forever practically, many other forms of writing as well. All this is to say that I know as well as I know anything that the loneliness at the heart of my project is not mine alone. The hunger for a feeling of connection that informs most everything I've written flows from a common break in a common heart, one I share with everyone I've ever really known.

Why this overmastering desire to communicate with others? (Virginia Woolf, "Montaigne"). And why does the desire to communicate with others most master us when we are least likely to feel sure that we can master *it*—the feeling of dumb fear that comes over us in the middle of the night, when it's too late or too early to call anyone? Everyone has his or her own version of this story, I am sure. Mine started suddenly, one summer, when I was young and had just begun to figure out that I wanted to write at the deep end of the pool. I had gone back home to my mother's house, to finish composing a manuscript that I really wanted to make fit for others to read. While there, I fell into the habit of waking up in the middle of the night, full of mild terror and sudden clarity about something that I had gotten wrong or left behind in what I had written the day before, something that had stalled my effort to communicate. Mission Statements and Major Mistakes that I couldn't see while the sun shone suddenly made themselves clearer than day in the full light of night.

The things that have called me from sleep have grown stronger and stranger over the years. Now they are feelings of error and of something missing as large as a lifetime and too vague to define, rather than missteps and omissions confined to yesterday's page or paragraph that wakes me up in the middle of the night (or sometime close enough). These are the feelings that assemble before the heart and mind of the middle-aged state, grieving and awaiting redress.

For a long time now, I've gotten used to going to bed early, and then waking up in the middle of the night, mistaking a crack of light at the bottom of my dream for the first light of the morning sun, feeling a little lonely and a little afraid, though not quite as I did when I was young. Now, I am mourning

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a little the loss of a life with others that I lived when I was younger, but which age and propriety will allow me to live no longer. Now I am moving toward losses (of my mother and much else) that I hardly know how I will bear.

It's a great relief to speak of those feelings now—even more than it was to speak to their youthful correspondents, way back when: the awakening pain has broadened beyond all page counts, but so has the feeling of peace that comes from writing my way through it.

That's because I feel pretty sure now that even while I'm writing in the dark, unable to see or even foresee anyone whom my words might reach, I'm not writing alone.

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Partly, this readier feeling of togetherness gains its force through what is surely the most prominent technical, technological innovation to hit writing in a very long time: the essays that you see before you in this book, like the incessant communiqués to which I have subjected students in my classes and my college at all hours, especially early and late ones, over the years (*Professor, some of those messages you send out sound like Stream of Consciousness*, one young man remarked), those incessant communications that are the predecessors of these essays, were written originally on the Internet, where the prospect of access to the hearts and minds of others is as instantaneous as it is elusive. (In a moment, I'll have more to say about my sense of the effects of the Internet on the way we write now.)

I suppose that anyone familiar with the pleasures of texting, whether by means of the Internet or some other telecommunicating medium, knows the joy of imagining that what we write will reach those whom we hope to reach with the speed of an arrow or an electronic pulse. Few can resist the temptation of this joy. *Oh, people don't communicate anymore! They just look at little screens!*, my mother declared—my mother, brought up in a world where long-distance calls were measured by an egg timer and occasioned by little short of a birth or a death. And now look at her: she's First in her iPad Class! (*I'm very glad to know how to use this thing: now I know I can*

always reach your sister, she has told me more times than I or any word counter could count.)

And, I suppose, anyone can feel the pang that attends the task of translating writing that originates in the liquid form of the virtual message, a liquid body of transport, quick-silvery as Mercury's wings, into the solid form of the book. This pang, though, is surely balanced by the intriguing desire to preserve at least some of the cargo communicated by those liquid means from dissolution into that very liquid.

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A friend asks: *How can this form overcome the ephemerality of screen communications, which, once read, may never be read again, may even simply disappear?*

By "this form," my friend means the virtual one through which I have sought, over the course of many years now, to communicate as best I can. Communicate what, exactly? Most of all, I have sought to communicate some version of "me" to some version of "you," as near and as far as the closest heart. What versions of "you" and "me" exactly? Well, I don't know that I can say exactly: someone a little better, a little bigger, a little more than any mere self on a bad day (a lean and mean day): someone, rather, fit to join our best selves on our best days: the ones through whom all our unforgettable woe is a little forgiven and made a little finer, a little more fair—at least for as long as the flash of an image or the length of a sentence.

Can some record of these better selves (more and less than any specific self) be prevented from perishing the instant the image flickers away and the period appears, the period whose point it is to put the sentence to bed? Can those better selves be stored, so that they might last longer than a candle put out or a screen put to sleep?

Well, of course. But can such preservation surpass the mere solidification of the letters that form them? Can the spirit of those letters survive their migration from their first home, as near as written words can be, to the living and dying (always flowing) stream of spoken ones? Can those characters be more than so many frozen assets, filed memoranda—paper trails, trailing but never really reaching, the moving play of spoken

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love, made warm by the hope that you and I are always within earshot of each other?

And what about the pictures? What about them? As I mentioned earlier, all of the essays set down here, installed now in the bound book you have before you, were once paired with a picture. Most have not survived the migration. (Those that have are nestled mostly in the latter part of the book.) And they all seemed so attached to one another! All the little essays that I wrote were like so many (*so many!*) postcards—and what are postcards without pictures?—*flocks ... herds ... human face divine* (Milton, *Paradise Lost*). As I suggested earlier, it seemed to me implausible to include the bulk of those pictures: as implausible as it would be to bind all our words (no matter where we set them down) to a picture that would illuminate them: as implausible as it would be to imagine that our mother will have the wherewithal to watch over us for the rest of our natural lives.

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While I believe that many of the messages that I have written to you are *sufficient to stand* (Milton, *Paradise Lost*) on their own now, without the pictures that have coaxed and conveyed them, I'll miss them just the same.

These are not easy questions, my friend remarks. But I cannot avoid asking them anymore than I can hope to answer them.

I can't help but be hopeful.

As to the images: a hope, hardly unprecedented, consoles me: the hope of the writer that the sights that he has cherished can be somehow installed in his very words themselves—those sights that have done more than words can ever say to bring those words into being:

thou Celestial light

Shine inward. (Milton, *Paradise Lost*)

As to the translation of words from liquid to solid form: I'm hopeful, here too. Recall all those voices you hear (voices, suddenly, that are, when you least expect it, *here*): the driest note, the deadest letter, giving way to the living spirit

whose love, lit from within, will speak to you before the day is done.

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In keeping with the common practice of the human heart (at least the heart that has made itself known to me), I have saved the hardest good-bye for last. As I have said, every essay in this volume was once attached to some particular image, made brilliant by the electric light of a computer screen. But the writing you have before you now was first lit up by something else as well, something from which it is most painful to part from that writing. The book that you have in your hands consists of writing that has been removed from its native society, and I would be wrong in more than one way were I to fail to acknowledge that society. I have alluded to this society already—at least I have mentioned its technological infrastructure: the invisible, partly audible and always felt community of readers made available by the Internet.

Many years ago, when I was still finding my way toward a midlife purpose (this volume is a partial record of that finding and that purpose), I received a message from a young man whom I knew only a little then, a message that helped me make my way.

Try as I might, I can't seem to recover that message now. The cost of someone such as me doing business on the Internet is all kinds of slips between cup and lip: all sorts of failures to send or save. But I have found that these losses do not matter very much. Take the loss of the message from that young man. That loss is hardly material: I remember the message, at least the heart of it, by heart. The title of the message was "Long Time Listener, First-Time Caller." Let me tell you: that was some first call. What did this young man have to say? Well, it may not sound like much when I say it, but it meant a world to me. He wrote to convey his approbation for what he saw me seeking to convey and encourage: *Only sincere sentiments, like this one!* That's what he wrote, sounding a little

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like the wounded hero at the end of *Great Expectations* who at long last returns home after a life of false pride, mortification, and exile to find, in his old place, a boy looking much like he did when he was young and before he was spoiled: *there ... sitting on my own little stool looking at the fire, was—I again!* Now, why did my young friend's words sound to my ears like those of that resigned but still hopeful hero? I think because both are mild but quite amazed intimations of someone being somehow redeemed: both imagine a world where people can be their best selves, or do their best to claim and reclaim those best selves, anyway.

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This may seem willfully blind or entirely foolish, I know. No one who has cast his eyes across the screens of the Internet—or the many cogent complaints about the deprecatory and delusive work that it can do to those who fall under its spell—can honestly avoid the suspicion that any community of readers formed by its virtual reach is at most a pale or engorged imitation of any community that anyone could imagine mattering. While I take such doubts to heart, I do not keep them there. I have been persuaded by many years of communication with many different kinds of callers that the citizens of the virtual world in which I have a stake, and from which the messages you have in front of you have been taken, can be just as virtuous as those who inhabit the world off-screen. The illuminated public sphere, as I have come to know it, whatever else it may do to the contrary, has helped fashion some of the best citizens I have ever known. These are the citizens of heart and mind whom I have sought to reach and who have, one way or another (personally, earnestly, critically), reached me. Everything I have written, I have written for them. They are present in every word that I now present to you. My gratitude to them surpasses evaluation. It is as difficult to decode as the screens of love itself.

This feeling of gratitude extends to include not only those who have been part of this writing for many years but also those who have been part of it only in passing. I shouldn't say only, since some of the intimacies that have best activated

the writing I am presenting here have existed only in passing. And it turns out that the elemental ephemerality that attended the first appearance of the brief essays anthologized in this volume extends beyond the particular medium in and for which they were originally composed.

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Reviewing what I have written to you over the past few years, I keep coming back to the feeling that it reflects and relieves the vanishing of a certain youthful hope. A friend my age said to me recently that she always felt like she was still in her twenties until she looked in the mirror. Well, the words I send out every day are themselves a kind of composite of that mirror. Sometimes I've wondered why so many of my morning compositions have felt like small acts of mourning something mildly big. What is the particular loss that generally marks and motivates what I've written over the course of our correspondence? Partly it is the loss of a once-crowded social world that I've already mentioned. But what I have written also marks the loss of something more intimate than that: the youthful hope (at least it was the hope of my youth) to have and to hold (and so to be held by) some continuous connection with some other party that would make both of us whole. Of course there are particular people and poems and points in between to whom and to which I return with something like religious regularity (like those birds whose migratory comings and goings my mother taught me to love). But I can no longer imagine that seeking to linger very long at any one time with any one of them would do any one of us much good. Thus the brief form that has engaged me so in recent years: the brief form of engagement by means of which I have sought to engage with you: the brief form of engagement that acknowledges the brevity of any human engagement with people and poems and points in between. Thus the nearness to tears that marks the beginning of so much midlife writing: as you get older, beginnings get harder and harder to tell from good-byes.

So much to love! So little time!

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Reader's Guide

Stop this day and night with me and you shall
possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun,
(there are millions of suns left).

(Whitman, *Song of Myself*)

Well, I don't know about that. Neither of us have all day, much less all night, to spend with one another—too many prior and subsequent commitments (assigned background reading or backstories, the next hard test or bright text). And I sure don't have the keys to every poem and every promise of a new day. (Who does?)

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But if you happen to have a few minutes to read what I've written, I hope you'll find that I've done what I can to make it worth your time.

I'm sure you'd do the same for me.

In the spirit of the brevity that is the soul of the intellectual hospitality I have sought to enshrine in these notes, I hope that you read what follows in any way, at any length, in any order, at any time (day or night), as often or seldom, and by any light that you like. I hope you will think of them as you would a moderately eccentric but pretty reliable friend who always happens to be around if you find yourself, in the midst of the business of your day and night, and the bustle of your moods, interested in hanging out for a while. You know that friend: his head is filled with all kinds of designs—but none of them are designs on you. He doesn't expect you to stay for long, or even necessarily visit very often, though he's always happy to think you might be visiting, and happy to think that you will stay for as long as you like. His house is filled with curiosities that he loves showing. And he's rather curious himself, and half the time, what he's saying—well, half the time, what *is* he saying?—he's not trying to trap you or trick you into staying longer than you like. Of course he wants your

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affection and your company, just as he wants to give you his. Mostly, though, he's trying to figure out what it is that he can do to make you feel sturdy and light in the midst of all our woe and wonder. When you do that, you make him feel sturdy and light himself.

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