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The Content of Poetry: What Needs to Be Said Now

What kind of poetry does the world need now?

The *Poetry* Symposium and its Critical Path have rightly focused on the craft of poetry as a musical and linguistic art: poetry cannot serve what we regard as its high purposes if it is not memorable in sound, beautiful in form, rich in meaning, and deeply coherent in idea.

But in this time of many crises, I believe we must also turn back to the world and ask what kind of poetry it needs and is not getting. And to ask this question opens up a range of radical thought. There is so much “out there” in the poetry world, isn’t there?—isn’t everything important covered already? This project would only be worth attempting if there is an aspect of things that our current cultural world is totally missing, a sort of blindness that is completely unconscious and that could be brought to light. Clearly there is an appetite for poetry that is relevant to people, and not just people as individuals, but people who must deal with the world at large. The huge popularity of Rap poetry, which—even in its often violent and destructive way—deals with the realities out there, should represent a challenge to us.

And after our recent cataclysms—the pandemic, the accelerating climate crisis, the radical undermining of the idea of truth, the near-collapse of liberal democracy, the renewal of the barbarities of last century’s modernist trench warfare—there may indeed be a crack in the prison of our assumptions, a chance for a foundational re-evaluation, and indeed a new world, of poetry.

Eliot said that old men ought to be explorers: maybe because old men have little to lose. Generalizations are dangerous but let us venture one anyway. As an old poet, when I look with an objective and skeptical eye at the range of current writing here

and in the “West” in general, one thing emerges. It is all about fixing what is broken.

This is not just a limitation on our poetry. It is common to all genres. Most fiction is about redemption of one kind or another: the wounded or broken soul who finds some kind of limited healing, the deracinated one who gets back a little piece of the treasured past, the oppressed one finding themselves, the avenger getting revenge, the detective solving the crime. Nonfiction is mostly about abuses that threaten catastrophe—climate change, inequality, racism, injustice, terrorism, corruption, the breakdown of political and legal order, public health failure, the abuse of office, the oppression of sexual and gender identities, the hidden sins of famous people, the mistakes of science, the damages wreaked by technology, market failure, psychological suffering and distortion, social anomie, drug addiction, the specter of right-wing extremism, the collapse of socialist ideals, and the big one—the end of life on this planet.

All these may be worthy causes, but together they indicate a powerful invisible assumption: things need to be fixed. This can mean either getting back to a lost state where things were better or redeeming the abuses of the past, but damage control is basically the whole function of writing. Look at the *Times* best seller list. In journalism, cable news, and social media, the jeremiads of serious writing are repeated as farce: what sells is bad news, the worse the better. Even good news is about good people struggling against a heartless system and bad people getting their comeuppance. Bad news is invented in huge quantities to fill the voracious demand as the moral bulimia exacerbates itself and the clickbait becomes more deliciously toxic. Happy endings are mostly successful revenge (usually termed “justice” or “closure”)—and no revenge can fully indemnify the loss.

And even to inveigh against the basic assumption as I have done in these last paragraphs is to contribute to it. So, what

other purpose is there in writing than to fix and protest and try, partially, to heal?

To ask this question is dangerous. There are regimes like China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, North Korea, Eritrea, Belarus, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Iran, and now even, apparently, Hungary, India, and Israel on a lesser scale, that love to see a press that is all sweetness and light and will sometimes kill and imprison to ensure it. There *is* a role for whistle-blowers. The dragons need to be fought, the reforms need to be campaigned for. But what makes the lands that the dragon ravages so valuable that they are worth defending, what great future is being saved by the dragon-slayer? What makes the state or church that needs to be reformed worth reforming in the first place?

There is almost no writing about what the institutions that whistle-blowers defend are supposed to be doing. Aren't they there to make things better, or at least to preserve a current state that is conducive to human flourishing? Human *flourishing*, not just surviving. *Can* humans flourish, especially young ones, if there are no new things to discover, no splendors of the past to unearth, no grand enterprises to attempt, no great future works to create, no new forms of better human experience, no advances in the potential of human relationships, no undiscovered joys, and no yet unrealized dreams? Wouldn't writing that speculates and envisages such flourishing be just as effective as writing that punishes its enemies?

Can we value the institutions we defend if we cannot imagine their future fruits and gifts and evolution?

Yes, any good story needs conflict and adversaries and stumbling-blocks and misunderstandings. But what makes a happy ending happy? What splendid and irreplaceable beauty or glory or joy is lost in a tragedy that makes the tragedy a real one? Shouldn't writing be exploratory, constructive, prophetic? Shouldn't it found as well as avenge and rebuild? Celebrate as

well as upbraid and nag? Virgil must have asked himself the same question in the *Aeneid*. Today's press story or movie or public poem would be about Aeneas hunting down, exposing, and destroying the Greeks who burned Troy, with only a faint promise of rebuilding it. Virgil's Aeneas goes on to found Rome. What Romes are there now for us to found?

Even science-fiction, for long a last bastion against the fashion of protest, complaint, and revenge, has darkened in the last decades with the paranoia of cyberpunk and the persistent myth of the revolution of the oppressed. The science-fiction writer Vernor Vinge used to say that the only stories he liked were those in which the world is different at the end than at the beginning.¹ The mainstream novel usually leaves the world unchanged; SF used to add new worlds to the old; newer science fiction often leaves it worse off. *Star Trek* is an anachronism: to boldly go where no one has gone before now sounds to the cynical ear like imperialism.

Even religious writing hews to the same line of brokenness and promised healing, restoration rather than discovery or glory or transcendence. It's all twelve steps and restitution and the evil of wealth and success and play and luxury.² Women's beauty comes under the censorious eye of social justice. As each new persecuted gender minority becomes accepted, it is included in the list of oppressors. Sports are darkened by fear of risk, cynicism about victory, preference for the underdog, and suspicion of discrimination. Humor is policed for insensitivity. As Sir Toby

1 In *Bladerunner*, the best lines are from the replicant's death-scene: "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die." Hauer and Peoples, the actor and writer, give us this hint in a movie that, excellent as it is, in every other way conforms to the universal rule of complaint and protest.

2 Except, of course, for the (sometimes justifiably) hated and despised evangelicals, who constitute an inchoate protest against the negativity of everything else.

Belch says of the Puritans in *Twelfth Night*, “Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there will be no more cakes and ale?”

What I have described here in the culture at large and in the popular writing genres is largely echoed in miniature in contemporary poetry—that is, when poetry even raises its eyes from its own navel to look at the big public world and the bigger universe around it. Certainly there are still good things to be said about the soul and mind and will of the poet. But often we learn more about ourselves in the public world of the epic than in the private world of the lyric.

The result of what we might call the remedial or restitutive mission of contemporary writing was deeply ironic.

All the hopeful and aspirational ground was ceded to the world of the market. This was unintended and counter to the ideals of those who perhaps rightly felt that our culture was becoming too transactional. But if all adventure and joy is subjected to moral suspicion, people will naturally go to where they are not under the rule of morality. Business and advertising are almost comically optimistic because they have been banished from the world of virtue and relieved of the expectation of morality. If glory and splendor and delight are forbidden in the realm of higher ethics, because of our historical shortcomings and present backslidings, we may go elsewhere to find them, even in the realm of the fake: this may be part of the message of the recent movie *Barbie*. Isn't it time that writing reclaimed the promise of transcendence from our materialistic commercial benefactors?

Even our undoubted achievements in science and technology have come under the censure of the literary world. The restitutive and censorious ethic I have been describing was largely responsible for the betrayal and relative mothballing of the space program, which shut one door against the hopes and aspirations of the world. But then the techies invented the personal computer and the internet, and a new world opened up anyway. Sad to say,

the social media that it enabled also enabled the metastasizing of the worst punitive tendencies of our new puritans. Science's stunning victories against the virus were grimly contested by the moralist right wing, deplored for their commercial origins by the moralist left, and suspected of political preference by every interest group.

If there is to be significant new poetry there must be new territory indeed to be explored. But can we rid ourselves of our own habit of retributive storytelling? Can we recapture the founding power of hope and the playful insouciance of the freed imagination?

Given that any serious new writing must find a space not already occupied successfully by current fashions, norms, narratives, and goals, what alternative conceptions of writing and its meaning afford themselves?

I argue that the current model of writing is one of investigation, accusation, repair, indemnity, reform, healing, redemption, and restoration, all worthy goals. The most pervasive term for this mission is "accountability." Legal justice is not enough for us: writing's function is to hurry it along, raise consciousness, arouse resentment, appeal to the heart and the adrenals.

But that model has a weakness. It can purport only to take us from a place of negative value to a place of acceptable neutrality—either on the "conservative" side by restoring a former valued status quo, or on the "liberal" side by adjusting different allocations of goods to a point of stability, equity, and justice, with the goal of creating a level playing field. But there is no provision in this narrative for what aspirations, opportunities, new spaces, values, and worthy projects might be afforded once the repair and healing are complete. What are justice and equity *for*? *Why* find a stable balance? *Should* the field be level? Doesn't it depend on what kind of games would best be played on the level playing field? The sport of rock climbing would not be a

good idea, and Bridge would be much a less interesting game if all the hands were identical in power.

And if we have fixed the problems, do we then rest on our laurels, or do we go on seeking out tinier and tinier unfair differences and unevennesses on the ballfield, smaller and smaller injuries and aches and pains, traumas and discontents to heal? If our institutions need to be reformed, what were they created for in the first place, and why? Just to correct themselves? What is the value of what we already have? What should we be grateful for? If we grieve that we have lost something, shouldn't we be curious about what made it good to us, and thus, what newer or more ancient goods might even be better? Why should we be more interested in punishing evil than showing the way to good?

So perhaps we need a new kind of writing, that finds out the horizons beyond which great goods lie and great games and "gestes" cry out to be performed. Those horizons are most obviously the ones that open before us in the future, but they are perhaps just as importantly the horizons of forgetfulness and incomprehension that bar us from the splendors and beauties of the past. Current writing on the past either uses it a stick to beat the present or imposes merciless ethical principles upon it that had not yet, after infinite sacrifice and striving, been invented.

At this moment we are recovering from a great plague of the body and a greater one in the body politic, and our preconceptions are more malleable than usual, as some have already pointed out. Plagues seem to precede moments of strange enlightenment. In Homer's *Iliad*, the insights that forged Greek civilization in the Trojan war stemmed from the plague that Apollo Smintheus inflicted on the hosts of Hellas. Sophocles begins his pathbreaking assault on the divine mystery in *Oedipus Rex* with the plague in Thebes, and the parallel *éclaircissement* in the Book of Job features a hero afflicted with a terrible disease. Many have observed how the Reformation and Renaissance blossomed out of the Black

Death, which unblocked Europe's energies, freeing up material and intellectual resources for its apotheosis and expansion to the New World. 1665, the date of the great London plague, could well be described as the birthday of modern science starring Hooke, Boyle, and Newton. The burst of artistic, scientific, economic, cultural, and technological discovery in the Roaring Twenties immediately followed the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1919.

Our plagues have variously given us breathing-spaces; let me here suggest some of the worlds that writing might now explore after this most recent one. Though we have already developed the tools of virtuality, they have been mostly used for recreation and addictive social quarrelling. Because of the lockdowns we have now discovered the huge territory of virtual *work*. This will change many things, and the best way to understand those changes may be in the realm of the Humanities. Let us follow the logic. Many have traced modern anomie to the separation of home and work in the nineteenth century. Families could no longer see their breadwinners winning bread. The pleasures of craft work disappeared when the home weavers and smiths and cabinetmakers succumbed to the assembly line. The family began to break up: divorce became easier, women were freed to exercise a realm of talents different from the rich ancient talents of the household mistress, wife, and mother. Here, in brief, is the history of Romantic poetry and the modern novel.

Cities developed specialized factory centers and residential areas and tore up the ground for railways and roads between them, obliterating old streets, ethnic enclaves, and city guild quarters. Now cities like Dallas and Los Angeles are strangled by the concrete deserts of the freeways, their work centers deserted at night, while the thickened air and the fast food that replaced home cooking create whole new industries to care for allergies and obesity. We have real jobs and virtual families; now even sex is becoming virtual, freed from the mess of real bodily cohabitation.

But all that may be reversed. Perhaps we are reentering the older world of cottage industry, real jobs and real families. The laptop, matter-printer, and robotic delivery will eliminate many reasons to leave the home. What will it be like when a whole generation grows up seeing their parents work, when parents will perforce get to know their children and vice-versa, when neighbors will begin to be noticed, and corporate culture will recede from immediate experience? What will happen to the family? Will it make a comeback?

Will the office buildings turn to flats, creating a whole new kind of population density with its accompanying opportunity for cultural events and local eccentricities? Will the private car disappear, together with its expense, freedom, design pleasures, danger, and pollution? Will the little shops come back? Will Jane Jacobs's city street return? Will the suburbs collapse and begin to go back to the wild, as with Detroit, or become real little cities of their own? Will the mall no longer be a euphemism but the normal condition for a city?

Will the roles of the sexes and gender preferences change? Will bearded dads and matriarchal moms replace the eternal boys and girls of Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge? Or will the fertility rate drop further below replacement level, leading to an aging population (as in Japan and many other advanced countries already), causing an economic slowdown, urban tranquility, and conservative public policy? Or will there be another baby boom, as men and women spend more time together and family work becomes more economically profitable and kids become a help rather than a burden? Will romance rear once again its ugly or beautiful head?

Can schools and universities survive AI? Will education be replaced by virtual encounters with inspiring charismatic intellectuals and visionaries?

The point of all these questions is not another

search-and-destroy grievance mission, but a reminder of the huge opportunities and imaginative liberation that are offered by our current disasters.

The panacea of our present conception of writing is public policy, to rub our noses in our failings, to hold accountable those who profit from them, to equalize the general misery, and to assert control. But public policy seems to be irrelevant to our present ills. How to assign blame when everyone seems to be blameworthy? In a plague, every victim is also a Typhoid Mary. It was the scientists and the great pharmaceutical companies that gave us the vaccines, not our governments and their policies. Writing, if anything, hindered rather than helped.

And in the other great epidemic, that of political paranoia, identity politics, conspiracy theory, illiberal “woke” thought control, race-baiting, alternative facts and insurrection, writing’s failure is even more obvious. Our horrified efforts to suppress the rise of ethnic nationalism, gender oppression, and racism have been exactly the right fuel for their flames. The proposed cure for the inborn human virus of racism, that is, woke ideology, acted like the human immune system confronted by the virus: it turned the lungs to glass and stopped the breath and killed the heart. The backlash to it nearly resulted in the end of our republic. It seems that when writing (in its contemporary model as moral policeman) tries to fix things, they often break. Our task now cannot be another attempt at a fix, but a recognition of the openings and opportunities that the current predicament offers us.

Looming over our twin plagues of the virus and the virtual world of political paranoia and conspiracy theory is the specter of global climate change. But if we change the model of writing, a new way forward may emerge, for what has happened is that we have been forced to change our understanding of events from the classical physics perspective of one-way cause and effect to the

eco-biological perspective in which everything causes everything else in systems that are themselves causes, that always have unintended consequences, that can spontaneously emerge and evolve, and that can alter the ecology of their own environment. The virus is but one example of this collective and emergent causality.

Of course, this ecological/evolutionary model has been around in the scientific world for a long time and is a familiar feature of market economics. But it has not until now challenged our current conception of writing as the exercise of accountability whose fundamental drive is to find a single cause of an evil and punish or abolish it. So what would a society look like that recognized a moral ecology, a moral market, whose benefits and ills are as inextricable as the wheat and tares in the parable, where beneficial change can and does happen, but through the inventive genius of people interacting freely and with hope, not necessarily by policing? Might not such a civil society have the resources to grow new structures and perspectives in which former evils are enlisted as helps and aids?

There are signs that a natural religion is growing up between the abstract and mechanical system of traditional religion, along with its nature-hostile timeless governing order, and the modern phenomenological-existentialist attempt to make sensation itself—especially sexual sensation—into meaning. Perhaps we could put it this way: that living time is nature's own way of super-naturing, inventing a new moment every moment, and the signs and wonders and ghosts and miracles of our various faiths are just metaphors for the real wonders of life and our ever-emerging consciousness.

The God of the Bible was not the abstract eternal principle, definable by mathematical terms like “infinite” and logical absolutes like “invisible,” “omniscient,” “omnipotent,” and “eternal” that religion has adopted since Plato's brilliant heresy. In the Bible, He is imaged as a process, a fire, a moving pillar of smoke,

a breath (*ruah* or spirit or pneuma—or Atman?), a whisper, a portable ark or vessel, a grapevine, a sprouting mustard seed, a sower, a shepherd, a chariot, a whirlwind, an angry and generous old man, a bridegroom. He shows himself especially in the process of reproduction—all those “begats”—whether in the animal-breeding success of Jacob, in the insistence on getting the right wife or husband, or in the repeated promises of the multiplication of descendants.

Perhaps the discovery of evolution was a rediscovery, by city-dwellers, of a truth utterly obvious to our herder and gardener and farmer ancestors who were well aware of species change, practiced it as breeders on a colossal scale, and were never tempted to consider species to be by definition fixed as categories in an eternal plenum. “Uncanny” species like the bat or snake, and uncanny birth events like twinship, were both sacred and taboo, and betokened the open promise of the world of natural spirit. Creation continues, and we too are uncanny, and thus among nature’s actors and initiators. We are the dancing shaman with the animal’s head, betwixt and between.

The creation of the Covid vaccines, chimeric monsters in themselves, by our own scientific shamans was a classic exercise in practical evolution. And our new climate-enforced attention to ecology, which is the ground and driver of evolution, carries with it a new-old conception of spirit. Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from miracle (to slightly warp a saying of Arthur Clarke’s). And technology perhaps is best seen as just our human nature’s version of Nature’s own ongoing way of transforming itself. Poetry is fast evolution; evolution is slow poetry. What kind of writing is appropriate to such conceptions?

The standard model of modernist evolutionary theory, which was an attempt to reduce evolution to a mechanics of the selfish gene, is now being disrupted by the observations of inclusive fitness, natural markets of commensality, and most radically,

the new science of epigenetics which shows how acquired characteristics, embedded in patterns of expression and suppression among gangs of genes, can be cultivated, inherited, or reversed across generations. Our cultures and societies are the product of our biology, but our biology can be massively changed by our individual, cultural, and social decisions. Freedom once more rears its ugly or beautiful head. Part of any new writing, the writing of addition rather than the minimization of subtraction, is the eco-biological/evolutionary perspective.

Evolution requires selection. We have seen a sort of Cambrian explosion in the social media, begetting many promising candidates for new values together with a host of monstrosities, destroyers, short-lived impractical contraptions, and vicious parasites. The new writing we need will emerge out of the chaos, but it is becoming clear that the selective process must be given a free hand. When printing was invented, it led to two centuries of inconceivably bloody war in Christendom. But gradually selective processes emerged that slowed the slaughter. In the age of print, the very expense of the medium was the tool that good gatekeepers—editors, critics, curators, clubs and societies, reviews, and subscriptions—could use to protect good writing and exclude the bad. But publication technology is now so cheap, quick, and anonymous that those constraints have been almost overwhelmed. We must bite the bullet and realize that we are going to need real elites in the realm of writing (along with stringent tests and bonds to ensure the good behavior of those elites).

We do not question the need for elites in, for instance, the realms of airline piloting and aircraft design, or in hospitals, scientific research, the legal bench, armies, and sports. Why not in writing, which is the air and water of culture, and which should be as unpolluted as it is wise? Again, this is an opening for new writing; but it is a huge challenge, because, by definition, censorship is the death of freedom, and freedom is the precondition

of creativity. Our new elites must have their way not by suppression, but by offering something sweeter and stronger and more nourishing than the parasites and predators can.

All writing is a kind of advertising, an advertizing, a call to take notice: if advertising is mostly bad, it is up to writers to do a better job. Writing, with robust elites to guide it, could still be a vital aid rather than an incitement to further harm. Writing can make culture better. But how can we judge what is a better culture, given the appalling imperialist and colonial history of cultural hierarchies? Do the “winners” or the “victims” deserve the higher place? Perhaps the answer is simple, though its implementation might be very difficult. What could supplant the current racial/religious/class systems of valuation which, when contested, cause such deadly culture-destroying strife?

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If we turn things on their head, we might suggest something like this: the highest cultures are the most truly inclusive ones. The most elite cultures are the most thoroughgoing mongrels, not the one-note thoroughbreds. They will be measured by the number of different cultural traditions that they combine, merge, and still enshrine in their uniqueness without loss or the devaluation of others. Translation will rise to the level of the highest “original” arts, and much of our original arts will be recognized as translation. Nobody has ever proved that there is a limit to the number of languages a person can learn, still less that there is a limit to the number of cultural stages that an individual can competently perform upon. Cultures that enable that true diversity of the imagination—and all culture is imaginative and rehearsed, as the anthropologists have been telling us—will flourish. This idea has actually been the deepest assumption of the humanities and explains their name.

Self-parochializing microcultures will have to propagate

themselves by marriage or be swallowed up by strangers whose understanding of the dissenting culture is actually better than its own. Uniqueness is not unsharability. This paradox is not a contradiction. One of the most unique cultures in the world, and one of the oldest, most influential, most durable, and most unmistakably characteristic of itself, is that of the Jews. But at the same time, the Jews are celebrated for their ability to shine brilliantly in a wide range of cultures, joining in the “stranger”’s cultural production as originally as the “native”-born insider. The fact that this capacity has aroused the fury of so many native populations is a sign of its success. If a group circles its cultural wagons, it starves. If it trades and shares and accepts foreign ideas, it flourishes. Today much writing is cultural wagon-circling. The new writing must open its gates.

But opening the gates is not enough. A truly elite culture must also do the cultural work of fully integrating the “strangers” and not giving them cause to exclude in turn (or forcing them to play the exotic). This work is the work of epic. All great art either participates in the epic enterprise or flourishes within the broad affordances of epic’s wide embrace. That enterprise is the making of grand narratives or maps or melodies that approximate the adventure of the human species as a whole, and even the adventure of Life itself in the vast orderly deterministic wasteland of interstellar physics.

Hard? Yes. But not impossible, as the greatest exponents of writing and the arts demonstrate. Who now does not own Shakespeare, the *Popol Vuh*, Homer, the sayings of Buddha, the Taj Mahal, *The Tale of Genji*, *Faust*, Machu Picchu, Mozart, Du Fu, the Bible, *Anna Karenina*—or at least have them for the asking?

Could we not envision writing for a next new (/old) world? What might that world look like? Let us play Nostradamus, put on the futurist’s hat, and try for the best.

A time when all employment that could be called human

drudgery will have disappeared to be replaced by machine intelligence and robotics. Work will be play, loving care, learning, adventure, discovery, and the perfection of discipline that the Greeks called *arete*. Most deeply it will be service, to self, others, humanity, and the world. Women's roles have already begun to change radically; now new roles for men (genetic or hormonal) will also emerge as we expand from our planet. Though heroic death (without which our humanity is untested and, therefore, not to be trusted) will no longer be needed here at home, it will still be found in the risks of exploration and discovery.

It is a time when love will be reinvented as true friendship and separated from the fickle and self-centered thrills of sexual and gender play. Those hormonal games will lose their stigma and their victimhood but will also lose any falsely-attributed moral weight and be carried out by a host of biotechnological and virtual means not necessarily involving other persons at all.

As working establishments, homes will become family houses, in the old sense of "house." New family cultures will emerge, marriages will have support, and child-rearing will receive the economic reward that it deserves.

Money will reemerge as a free and private means of exchange—but because of its new blockchain certification, cannot be stolen or counterfeited. As every piece of property joins the internet of things, theft will largely disappear, and as the technology of manufacturing becomes quicker, cheaper, more local, more customizable, and more harmlessly recyclable, only original artworks will be irreplaceable. What will happen to mimetic desire?

Voluntary cities will emerge across the world, bound only by the rule that any person is free to enter or leave. A multitude of regimes will flourish together with a wild efflorescence of new cultures, dialects, traditions, and artforms.

Education will return to James Garfield's definition: a student at one end of a log and a great teacher at the other.

Homeschooling, apprenticeship, and an expansion of the current scientific conference system to the whole population will transform the process of learning and the increase of knowledge. Interdisciplinarity will be the norm, not the exception, and specialization will be redefined as the fruit and seed—not the root—of research.

We will live in a society where everyone will know their own essential mixedness of ethnic and genetic identity, discovering we are all both in-laws and cousins of each other. As the human race mixes further, “race” will lose its distinctive markers in any case; each person will be their own race.

Our social media will no longer be based on advertising but on subscription. Our capacity for data-mining will be so advanced that any meme will be traceable to its originator, and any user of the meme will have to pay an appropriate, even if tiny, royalty to the creator. But at the same time, a meme-creator will be financially liable for any harm created by a false or criminal meme, provable by the same chain of transmission.

Wars will still happen, but the known harm caused by the possible weaponry we will be able to create will act as an absolute limit to escalation. It will be fighting in the street with sticks and stones, generally to the great disadvantage of both sides as neighbors intervene to separate them and charge them for the service.

Healthy human longevity will steadily increase. Death, however, will still be too important a moral and spiritual experience to put off altogether, so the very old may be among the pioneers of our most hazardous and valuable explorations.

And perhaps in all these changes, we will recover the grand themes of human civilization, the hidden seeds in our great literary and religious traditions, our true aspirations, and our relation to the force that moves the sun and other stars.

