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## Trading Pain for Knowledge, or, How the West Was Won

The only way into truth is through one's own annihilation;  
through dwelling a long time in a state of extreme and total  
humiliation.

—Simone Weil, “Human Personality”

A GENERATION AGO, THE SUBJECT WAS KNOWLEDGE AND POWER; TODAY, the subject is knowledge and pain. Ultimately, they may turn out to be the same subject, because nothing secures, augments, or confirms power like the free assumption of pain. But for the purposes of this essay, and in keeping with its argument, I will focus on pain, although it would be more pleasant to talk about power. In doing so, I will confine myself to rigorous inferences based on disinterested observation, bracketing my personal prejudices, biases, or desires. My conclusions will follow directly from the evidence. In undertaking this essay, I agree to sit very still for many hours of reading, meditation, and composition, during which time I will forego all immediate pleasures, including excessive food and drink. In the service of truth, the volume on the television will be turned down to the very point of inaudibility, until the last two minutes of the game.

Already, I feel the pain. It is an old and familiar pain, one I am so intimate with that I have come to desire it, partly because it recalls to me the days of my youth, when I was instructed by a series of

mostly elderly men on the customary practices of the guild to which I desired admittance. I was told, at an age when the world shone bright before me and a seemingly infinite future of possibility beckoned me onward, that a scholar would, over the course of a working life, spend hundreds of thousands of hours all by himself (definitely himself: I never had a female teacher after ninth grade), staring at small print, thinking, puzzling, struggling, forgetting and relearning, assembling an ever vaster quantity of information. One would, I was told, engage in constant struggle with words, both those written by others and the ones one was trying to write oneself. I was informed that unlike those other “creative” writers whose words I would be studying, I would have to “support” everything I said by citing a previous text. If I felt absolutely compelled to voice an opinion, it would be best if I disguised it by merely implying assent to the opinion of someone else with whom I happened to agree. In some cases, I might present the opinions of others as facts. These people felt this way, I might note, and their opinions are a matter of record. Even better, I might rehearse the arguments that had persuaded others, note that they had been persuaded, and imply that I, too, found these arguments persuasive. Such procedures were permitted. Out of “fairness,” I should consider and treat with maximal respect every possibility that I might be wrong. Such deliberate self-exposure “strengthened” the argument. And when all counterarguments had been vanquished—not by brute force but by the unforced force of the better argument, the accumulation of evidence—I must not gloat, but must express only a cold satisfaction that the truth has prevailed. On rare occasion I might, through a figure of speech or a fleeting comment, suggest something like a personality, but such moments must be confined, and nonessential to the argument. Passive verbs were good things, suggesting seriousness.

At the end of a very long process of tutelage in the rigors of the discipline, I was told that the rule of the guild was “publish or perish.” My eyes glistening, my cheeks bright with the flush of youth, desire surging through my veins, I permitted myself a momentary pause—

and then, instead of asking, “What’s the difference?” I asked, “Where do I sign?”

But enough about me. The hypothesis to be explored in this essay is that the tradition of scholarship that we in the West have inherited includes as part of its self-understanding an implied bargain: an exchange of pain for knowledge. In this tradition, pain authenticates, verifies, and dignifies: in the West, we hold it to be a truth universally acknowledged that the truth obtained through pain is superior to that which can be obtained by pain-free means. Self-denial—the negation or extinction of bodily desire and the quest for pleasure—is the condition of truth; scholarship is distant kin to martyrdom. In the tradition we have inherited and to which we continue to contribute, pain is thought to disclose to us a truth beyond the imprisoning circle of our subjectivity. It sets us free from our merely personal or organic desires and liberates us from the cage of self-ends that otherwise encloses us. In our tradition, individual bodily identity, with its insistent desires, distractions, and inconstancies, can only interfere with the project of knowledge.

For some reason, others—non-“Westerners”—do not seem to feel the same way about truth and pain. For folkloric or anthropological reasons only they can comprehend through their indigenous ways of knowing-feeling, some people do not share our conviction that pain is the condition of knowledge. It is to be hoped that in the fullness of time, they will achieve the cultural maturity of the West. We should certainly try to assist them with all the means at our disposal—without, of course, patronizing or condescending to them. We should in fact study them to learn what we can about their curious ways. But if we were to write up the results of our study, we would, of course, have to follow the protocols described above, so our knowledge can be communicated to those who would most benefit from it—people like ourselves, who have developed culture-neutral ways of determining and telling the truth. Ultimately, despite our deep respect for the other, we do not accept the proposition that truth is culture-specific or culturally

determined, and do not believe that the fact that this understanding of truth is peculiar to the West compromises its validity.

Since it is well known that the number three has magical properties, I would like to explore this hypothesis by considering three moments where key points in this agreement—pain suffered yields knowledge gained—have been negotiated. And now, if you'll excuse me.

### **THE RISE OF THE SCHOLAR AS HOLY MAN**

As he grew and became a boy, and was advancing in years, he could not bear to learn letters, wishing also to stand apart from friendship with other children.

—Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*

The young man who eventually became Saint Antony of Egypt exhibited early promise. Even before he was old enough to undertake the more advanced forms of deprivation that would characterize his maturity, he withdrew from the company of other children, and from the world contained in books. Later, as his biographer Athanasius (later Saint Athanasius) records, Antony retreated to increasingly remote and less habitable locations, subjecting himself to ever severer circumstances, chastening and mortifying every instinct, appetite, and desire in an attempt to conquer his mortal condition and become godlike. In Athanasius's account, this project was the sole activity and entire point of his life, a life that was incongruously influential. By withdrawing from human society in the way he did, Antony founded the monastic way of life that spread rapidly from Egypt to the rest of the Middle East and came to define the Christian form of asceticism. *The Life of Antony* itself was influential, as the first "saint's life" and therefore as one of the foundational texts in the history of narrative that eventuated in the modern novel. An illiterate, friendless hermit whose immense fame rests on the particular style he (and his biographer) gave to his desolation, Antony stands at the bursting fountainhead of rich and

deep traditions in religion, spirituality, art, narrative, and—it will be argued—epistemology. In his so-called life, we can see, as if in primary colors, the exchange of pain for knowledge being negotiated.

Given Antony's voluntary and almost instinctive illiteracy, it is remarkable that so much of Athanasius's text is taken up with an ongoing, multifaceted, and remarkably intricate argument about knowledge and particularly about the kind of knowledge we can get from reading books. This is not, of course, how Antony or his biographer see the matter. As Athanasius notes, Antony became famous "neither from writings, nor from pagan wisdom, nor from some craft," but "on account of religion alone" (1980: 98). And that religion, as described by Athanasius, centers on the phenomenon of demonic temptation, with the demons manifestly standing in for one's own desires for food, sex, and relaxation, for the drifting and indifferent life of *l'homme moyen sensuel*. The demons, which even Antony understands as proxies for these desires, have furnished Western art with fantastic opportunities for artistic innovation: Bosch, Brueghel, Grünewald, Schöngauer, Teniers, Callot, Dali, and many others have represented Antony's demons as wild agglomerations of violent and mismatched body parts, tormenting the saint in ingenious ways. Antony's resistance to them, like his refusal of the comforts of home, represents a heroic assertion of spiritual simplicity and purity in the face of the complexity represented by the body and its desires. Still, beneath the obvious drama of the struggle with demons, there is a deeper struggle with epistemology, particularly the epistemology of language.

Books could be written about the place of language in the Christian religion. Indeed, the Bible is the first such book, being both the word of God and *about* the Word of God, that is, Christ. "In the beginning," the Gospel of John begins, "was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This mysterious formulation suggests that while antimonies, as between original and imitation, spirit and flesh, God and humanity, might appear to be absolute, the Christian faith suggests how they might be reconciled. Christ is both God and

“with” God; similarly, human beings are both mortal and divine. The task allotted to humans is to mortify the mortal parts of existence in order to allow the immortal spirit to shine all the more brightly. In this context, “letters,” or writing, represent bodiliness, the “mortal” dimension of language, while voice or speech stands in for the spirit. This, at least, is one way of accounting for Antony’s aversion to the text even of the Bible, which a person dedicated to religion alone should, it seems, venerate. Athanasius takes pains to point out that Antony’s phobic response was confined to the text and did not extend to the meaning: Antony, he notes, attended carefully to “the readings” (public readings of Scripture), and “carefully took to heart what was profitable in them” (30-31). For Antony, it appears, language has an isomorphic relation with human being, being composed of one part corruption and death and one part immortal spirit. Antony converts to a life of ascetic denial when he happens to enter the church just as the words that would be most meaningful to him were being read: “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” Hearing this, he gives away his possessions (donating his sister to a convent) and sets out for the great desert, where he dedicates his life to the task of achieving perfection. But the precondition for his saintliness was his discernment of the ascetic tension within language itself.

Antony’s literate peers would already have been sensitive to a certain difficulty in language that had been defined in, for example, the debates between the Stoics and the Peripatetics, in Aristotle (*De Interpretatione*), and in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, where Socrates describes writing as the “language of the dead,” an “external” and “inferior” sign that cannot compare to the living presence of consciousness, which is present in speech. Antony’s abhorrence of letters suggests that the classical disdain for writing was enjoying an afterlife in Egypt, where it had become a shuddering avoidance of what was considered to be in effect a corpse. The figure of Christ represents the Christian contribution to the classical meditation on language, for Christ, the Word, is

represented as the speech of God, the means by which God “spoke” to mankind, and therefore as the key to overcoming death and achieving salvation or eternal life. Reserving his attention for speech, Antony demonstrates that he is already prepared to be saved, even before hearing the converting word.

The Christian modification raises the stakes of language to an astonishing degree, making of it a moral drama with heavy—indeed, infinite—consequences. Naturally preferring speech and life on what would, after his example, become known as ascetic grounds, Antony also recognizes the danger, from this proto-ascetic perspective, of “the readings,” which took the form of communal singing of the Psalms. Such an occasion would be profoundly equivocal, with the Word being subjected to incarnation, sung by bodies in close proximity, all enjoying the pleasures of rhythm, sound, and perhaps even contact. In his “Letter to Marcellinus,” Athanasius points out that the chanting of Psalms is for the benefit of “the simple among us,” and must not be regarded as an effort to make the Word “pleasant and winning” (123). But it *was* pleasant and winning—that was the point. And so the experience of hearing or chanting the Psalms would pitch one into a scene of excitement, confusion, and anxiety, forcing one to try to distinguish between the arousal of the soul and the arousal of the body.

As the complicating element of language, speech is demonic, for demons, in this text, represent unwanted complexity. Horribly ingenious assailants, demons seem to come from some other monstrous world, a hellish zone that inhabits the familiar world and rises up to attack the faithful. They are as “external” as creatures can be, and in that respect their assaults may seem, like assaults generally, to induce clarity in the object of their attention. But what makes them demonic is not their physical force, but rather their uncanny intimacy with the individual mind of their victim. “I am not the one tormenting them,” Satan tells Antony in a memorable conversation, a temporary lull in the battle, “but they disturb themselves” (62). The victims themselves understand that demons represent unconquered desires and impulses;

this is why demonic assaults are called “temptations,” and why victory over them represents a moral triumph. Such triumphs are not easy to come by, since it is the nature of demonic attack to render one uncertain whether one is under attack or not. “Their actions correspond to the condition in which they find us,” Antony says; “they pattern their phantasms after our thoughts” (63). Demons demonstrate the unreliability of the most elemental distinctions, including the boundary between self and nonself, desire and loathing, inside and outside, crisis and normal life.

They do this in the first instance by insinuating themselves into the relationship between voice and meaning, the relation that the Bible teaches is a difference without a distinction. “They pretend to chant with sacred songs,” Antony complains, “and they recite sayings from the Scriptures. And even when we are reading”—in an unexplained development, Antony at some point along the way acquires literacy—“they are able to say right away and repeatedly, as if in echo, the same things we have read . . . [they] pretend to speak like the devout, so that by means of the similarity of form they deceive, and then drag those whom they have beguiled wherever they wish. . . . everything they do—they talk, they cause mass confusion, they pretend to be others than themselves, and they create disturbances—all this is for the deception of the simple” (50-51). By speaking without belief or conviction, demons underscore the merely formal dimension of speech, the fact that it can be mimicked or repeated without motivation or authenticity, and is therefore not necessarily instinct with spirit or animating intention. In the mouths of demons, even “the readings” become empty, meaningless, mocking.

For most problems faced by ascetics, self-mortification is the answer. But in a framework in which death is cultivated over the course of a long life, or in which the extinction of desire is eagerly desired, solutions can sometimes resurrect problems. In the ascetic tradition Antony founded, for example, competition was common. Monks were regarded as “athletes of Christ,” and even boasted to each other about the degree

of deadness they had achieved through discipline. Mortification is a solution to the problem of bodiliness, but boasting can only be considered a problem. Things only get worse when one considers that since the goal is eternal life, death, or mortification, can also be considered a problem. In the domain of language, speech may liberate meaning and release the “profit” in the text, but as a carnal act, it also gives voice to the dying body. Textuality would seem to be a more appropriate medium for delivering a message of death; and in fact, Athanasius implies that, at a later point in his life, Antony had somehow learned to read. But this only returns us to the problem with the text with which we began, its nonliving inertness, which requires living human speech in order to activate it.

The infernal or demonic complexity of the ascetic dilemma is condensed, then, in Antony’s relation to language. The same complexity gathers around Athanasius’s text, which is offered to others who might wish to follow Antony’s example as guide and inspiration. Having begun by noting Antony’s illiteracy, Athanasius concludes with the triumphant declaration that his book will spread Antony’s fame—for how else could a man who had spent his life “concealed and sitting in a mountain” be made known to the world? “Therefore,” Athanasius concludes, “read these things now to the other brothers so that they may learn what the life of the monks ought to be” (99). The other brothers (who seem to be illiterate) must learn about life from a “dead”—that is, textual representation of a dead person. Thus is eternal life—that of the other brothers, and of Antony as well—achieved through the medium of death.

Athanasius’s hopes were well founded, because *The Life of Antony* almost immediately became famous. When Augustine, in the throes of agony, hears a voice saying, “*Tolle lege!*” (take up and read), he immediately recalls the incident in *The Life of Antony* when Antony, through a lucky happenstance, entered the church at precisely the moment when the appropriate Scriptural verse was being read. Inspired by this example, Augustine takes up the Bible and opens at random, discovering just

the text that he most needs. He then dedicates his life to Christ, and writes his *Confessions*, a text that secures his eternal fame. Other “lives of the saints” followed, and eventually the narrative tradition of secular literature emerged. In this tradition, the fortunes of an individual are tracked, beginning with an initial situation of instability or unsuitability, proceeding through a rising line of complication, eventuating in a moment of crisis, and followed by a denouement, with illumination as the reward for hard experience. The reading of such narratives came to be associated with a vague moral value, which continues to shadow “the humanities” to the present day.

Antony has also cast his shadow over modern thinking about language, especially the relations between intention, speech, and writing. Advanced literary theory of the generation just passed evoked the same issues Athanasius confronted and focused, as he did, on issues of life and death. The “death of the author” achieved through the mortification of presence and life in the text was one such evocation, and the deconstructive understanding of language as an inhuman engine of death—the “dead letter,” as Derrida put it—was another. Derrida’s evocation of “logocentrism,” a tradition ripe for deconstruction, focused on secular linguistics and philosophy, but might have included as well a consideration of the religious tradition. When Derrida declared that there was nothing outside the text, he reframed Antony’s aspiration, which was to eliminate everything in himself that did not conform to the Word of God. The Derridean concepts of “difference” and “dissemination” also represented theoretical reformulations of theological insights into the demonic independence of language from mind. But in two respects, deconstruction does not measure up. While Derrida acknowledged a death force in language, he followed the classical tradition in situating death in writing, and did not see how speech, too, could be deathly. And while Derrida articulated an “ethic of discussion,” his account was incomparably less concrete and dramatic than the situation rendered so unforgettably by Athanasius, who represented the text as a site of demonic temptation (Derrida, 1988, “Afterword”).

Deconstruction is but one of many evidences that Antony has in fact achieved eternal, or at best extended life by the luminous way in which his life clarified the complex filiations between language, knowledge, and asceticism. Antony's inability to arrive at a satisfactory solution to the problem of how to court death and life simultaneously is one key to his continued pertinence; for what asceticism represents, in modern terms, is not accomplishments or solutions, but rather endless progress toward an always distant goal. The modern form of this fetishization of progress is called "science."

### SCIENCE AND THE ETHOS OF OBJECTIVITY

The heroes of science are they who capable of the loftiest views have been able to . . . resign themselves to the role of humble monographers, when every instinct of their nature would have impelled them to scale the high summits. . . . This in the style of the gospel is called; losing one's soul in order to save it. *To make up one's mind to ignore so that posterity may know*, is the first and foremost condition of the scientific method.

—Ernest Renan, *The Future of Science*

In this passage, written in 1849 when he was just 25 years old (but not published until over 40 years later), Ernest Renan announced the transition from the religious to the scientific paradigm. Of course, this transition was also announced elsewhere, but Renan is a pivotal figure, and this book, *The Future of Science*, is the clearest expression of the new hope that science could replace the faith it was discrediting and dislodging. The use of the gospel text to illuminate the scientific method is fully intentional; indeed, Renan begins *The Future of Science* with a Scriptural quotation about "the one thing needful," and devotes nearly 500 pages to the proposition that science represents the fullest realization of human being, a form of devotion that improved on religion because it was untainted by falsehood and illusion. Renan did not aspire to perfec-

tion, and certainly never sold what he had with the intention of obtaining treasure in heaven; but having lost his faith as a young man, he remained fervently committed to the idea that the truth requires sacrifice and renunciation.

Following a conversion to reason that was every bit as traumatic and decisive as Antony's conversion to religion, Renan became a tireless advocate for science, but also an eloquent defender of the immense historical accomplishment of Christianity and of the deep emotional satisfactions of its theology. The lingering effects of his childhood experience of Christian belief and community are immediately evident in his most famous work, *The Life of Jesus*, an account that, although it angered orthodox believers by treating Jesus as a figure of human and historical importance, was devotional in spirit. But an even more telling sign of his pietistic inclinations is the particular nature of his commitment to the scientific method. In Renan, we see asceticism converted from a religious discourse with implications for epistemology into a scientific discourse with religious overtones.

One of the comforts of Christianity, according to Renan, is the assurance it provides that all souls are meaningful and valuable in the eyes of God. To those who find their lives meaningless and their sufferings intolerable, Christianity responds that individual lives are not simply mites in the vast planetary drift, but contribute to an immense cosmic harmonium. The Bible shows how countless suffering and dying individuals advance the story of the world, a story that extends from the beginning of time to the end. In *The Future of Science*, Renan records, in warmly emotional terms, how as a child he had been struck by the sudden revelation of "the immense oblivion and the vast silence amidst which human life is swallowed up"; and then how, as an adult, he had come to realize that "an enormous and lavish expenditure of the individual, a contemptuous agglomeration of human beings" was required for the fulfillment of humanity's great mission (1891: 206, 207). He records his gradual understanding of the fact that the contributions of even the greatest genius will, within a century or two, be

reduced in the world's accounting to a couple of pages; indeed, entire continents and centuries have largely disappeared from the consciousness of an onrushing present. Still, Renan writes, human beings must find their sense of self-worth in the fact that they spend their lives carrying tiny pebbles to make up the mighty edifice of human accomplishment, serving as "the wall flowers' at the grand ball conducted by destiny" (207). For a human metaphor for this fact, Renan turns to the monastery. Even "this or that nun who vegetates unnoticed," he writes, serves as "an atom in the grand mass of black" that is the monastic life. For him, it goes without saying that the world is well served by the "sweet, timid and pensive piety" exhibited by nuns, no matter how vegetative (208).

Scientists are modern nuns, devoting their lives to a higher cause, knowing full well that their best efforts will be ignored by posterity. The most the scientist can hope for is that his name might be remembered and vaguely associated with something valuable, that he may be considered to have contributed to the cause of truth a tiny particle—even if that particle is nothing more than a quantum of untruth that had to be discarded, disproved, or judiciously ignored in the course of the grand march of progress. There is, for Renan, no shame in this condition of individual insignificance—after all, "are not thousands of lives lost every day, what is called absolutely lost, in the furthering of the arts of luxury, in contributing a mere scrap of nourishment for the pleasures of the idle?" (209) How much nobler to lose oneself in furthering human knowledge!

For Renan, the vanguard discipline of modernity, the science of sciences as it were, is the discipline focused on the subject that had so consumed Antony: language. "Rationalism, criticism, liberalism," Renan writes, were all "founded on the same day as philology" (131). "*The founders of the modern spirit are the philologists,*" and philology is nothing other than "*the exact science of the productions of the human intellect*" (128; emphasis in original). All advances made by humanity since the fifteenth century could be attributed to the work of this excellent disci-

pline, which had opened up the human past by developing a comparative method that enabled the true study of languages, cultures, and human origins. Philology itself, rather than individual philologists, gets the credit, for the typical and routine work of the discipline consists of micro-textual nitpicking of the sort that justifies the oblivion to which wall flowers are consigned. "To appreciate the value of philology," Renan writes, "we should not ask ourselves what is the worth of this or that obscure monograph, this or that note which the scholar crams in at the bottom of a page of his favourite author. . . . We must consider the revolution philology has wrought," its decisive contribution to rationality, liberalism, and progress (133).

Such a view of scholarship presumes deep and durable continuities between the tomb dwellers and monastic nonentities of the Christian tradition and the heroes of scientific modernity. Indeed, it is the long view that illuminates the true character of ascetic existence as an unending process of individual self-immolation undertaken in the service of human progress, first from a spiritual and then from a scientific or "critical" perspective. One must renounce all vanities and vexations of the spirit and devote oneself to this hard, humble, and laborious task, for the "lofty serenity of science" is bestowed only on those individuals who have voided all desires for applause and gratification, and have resigned themselves "for the sake of posterity to the laborious calling of mere navies, and condemn themselves, like the plough horse to see only the furrow it turns" (219-20). When one has become a perfect atom, plough horse, or navy, when one attains "the inflexibility of the geometrician," then one may qualify as a scientist, one for whom results are "the mere echo of facts" (256, 198).

I elaborate Renan's views in this context because they were themselves so uncontroversial, and seemed so unquestionable, that they have been largely forgotten, assimilated to the great dance of the nineteenth-century faith in science, absorbed into the ethos. What is striking about them is the candor with which he concedes that this ethos was at bottom religious. "Modern" or "new" philology grew,

in fact, directly out of scholarship on the Old Testament carried out by J. G. Eichhorn, who treated the sacred text in a historical and an anthropological spirit as a compilation of various texts rather than as the revealed word of God. In applying the same methods to Homer, the first “modern” philologist, F. A. Wolf was, as Anthony Grafton puts it bluntly, “in essence merely transferring results from theology to classical philology” (Grafton, Most, and Zetzel, 1985: 29). The theological origin is marked, too, in the nun-like character of the ideal philologist. As Nietzsche said in *Daybreak*, “Philology is that venerable art which exacts from its followers one thing above all—to step to one side, to leave themselves spare moments, to grow silent, to become slow—the leisurely art of the goldsmith applied to language: an art which must carry out slow, fine work, and attains nothing if not *lento*” (1997: 74).

Philological theory may have been theology in all but name, but with the passage of time and the rise of modernity and secularization, the more important fact was that scientific epistemology was also an ethic. Philology proceeded in a spirit of self-denial, in which the immediate, obvious, or desirable reading was replaced by a skeptical, aggressive inquiry that began with the presumption that the text was not what it appeared to be. Between the text and the naïve reader, philology intruded erudition, method, and an uncompromising determination to overcome human fallibility, weaknesses, and inclinations in the effort to produce an authentic text. “A true rescension,” Wolf wrote, “replaces attractive readings with less attractive ones.” And it does so with a certain relentlessness: “It takes off bandages and lays bare the sores. Finally, it cures not only manifest ills, as bad doctors do, but hidden ones too” (Wolf, 1985: 44). Exemplified, in Renan’s account, by philology, modern science was conceived as a practice to be undertaken only by those disciplined enough to be able to bear its rigors—Antony, for instance; or, even better, Saint Jerome, who spent years in desert solitude translating the Bible, alone with his text and his temptations.

Those who, like Antony, Augustine, and Jerome, had the right stuff became famous for their capacity for self-extinction. In some of the most fascinating pages in his recent book *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (2006), William Clark describes the charisma generated by Wolf, noting how his striking indifference to personal comfort, his extraordinary work habits, his otherworldly commitment to the task of scholarship earned him an extraordinary reputation. Wolf was one of the first of a species that came to prominence in the research universities that emerged over the course of the nineteenth century. Neither holy men nor gentlemen, they were something distinct: scholars who had sacrificed all pleasures and ordinary comforts of life in the pursuit of knowledge. The aura of superhuman greatness that surrounded these men extended the monastic prehistory of the university into the modern era.

In order to be a scientist in any discipline in the nineteenth century, one had to be able to negate oneself utterly, so that one could behold the thing in itself, with no subjective interference whatsoever. The truth was held to be independent of any subjective perspective, available to any who could suspend their own desires and subjectivities sufficiently to allow their reason to apprehend it. The key term, according to Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's 2007 book *Objectivity*, was—objectivity. As they point out, the arrival onto the scene of this most fundamental of scientific and scholarly values was far from inevitable. It came into ascendancy around the middle of the nineteenth century (with the highly influential support of Renan), its cause helped enormously by the developing technology of photography. Surveying a large number of scientific atlases in which the objects that constituted a given scientific field were represented, Daston and Galison note that before the age of photography, objects were depicted artistically, as in Audubon's *Birds of America*, with idealized and aestheticized representations. Almost as soon as photography was invented, such atlases switched over to the new format, producing images through mechanical rather than artistic means, which meant that the object

was reproduced as it was, without human intervention. Rather than idealized types, objects were now individualized, with all their contingent features intact. In the era of mechanical objectivity, the human being had no role to play other than to click the shutter.

So thoroughly naturalized is the concept of objectivity that it comes as a shock to learn how recent was its invention, and how extreme were the costs it was thought to exact in pursuit of truth. Objectivity produced not just a new understanding of scientific representation, but virtually a new kind of scientist; or rather, it produced an old kind of person—the desert saint—in a new kind of role: the disinterested observer of scientific facts. With the advent of mechanical objectivity, scientists became nervous about their own tendency to idealize, prettify, and regularize observation. The word “subjective” became an epithet. Science became at once a technical and a moral discipline, conceived in terms that would have been familiar to Antony: the scientist, in the new dispensation, was a creature assailed by temptation—not by lust or gluttony, but simply by selfhood, which stood between the eye and the object. Mechanism is not opposed to moralism; it is the very means by which morality is served. As Daston and Galison put it, “objectivity is to epistemology what extreme asceticism is to morality” (2007: 374). In an earlier article, Galison made an even stronger statement, saying that objectivity “emerges as a ferociously austere, self-denying virtue, a virtue present when all the special skills, intuitions, and inspirations of the scientist could be quieted and nature could be transferred to the page without intervention or interpretation. Like the ascetic through whom God would speak, the scientist’s self-silencing, for the advocates of objectivity, would create the moral and epistemic conditions under which Nature could speak” (Galison, 1999).

Eventually, Galison and Daston say, mechanical objectivity yielded to what they call “trained judgment,” a method of manipulated presentation that emerged in the early twentieth century. Trained judgment sought to correct the contingencies introduced by the reproduction of a single object, and to reintroduce human intelligence as an

active force in the perception and representation of the facts. But while objectivity is no longer dominant, it has not been altogether eclipsed, for a more general and less extreme version of it has become part of the scientific and indeed of the broader scholarly culture. Even after a century of devastating attacks on the notion that a human being could achieve the perfect selflessness inherent in the ideal of objectivity, it remains, embedded in routine practices and our most conventional self-descriptions. As Thomas Haskell points out in his now-classic article “Objectivity is Not Neutrality,” the idea of self-denial as the path to truth is deeply implicit in the very idea of research:

The very possibility of historical scholarship as an enterprise distinct from propaganda requires of its practitioners that vital minimum of ascetic self-discipline that enables a person to do such things as abandon wishful thinking, assimilate bad news, discard pleasing interpretations that cannot pass elementary tests of evidence and logic, and, most important of all, suspend or bracket one’s own perceptions long enough to enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers. All of these mental acts . . . require *detachment*, an undeniably ascetic capacity to achieve some distance from one’s own spontaneous perceptions and convictions. . . . To be dissatisfied with the view of the world as it initially appears to us, and to struggle to formulate a superior, more inclusive, less self-centered alternative, is to strive for detachment and aim at objectivity (Haskell, 1998: 148).

Of course, it now makes perfect sense to think that in the pursuit of truth we must try to aim at objectivity. But the properly ascetic kernel of this truism is the caveat that we must never think that we could achieve it. If we could, we would fall victim to the sin of pride, and the spiritual or moral aspect of our quest would be nullified, even reversed.

For this reason, the scholar or scientist must not expect to attain what he seeks, nor must he even desire to attain it, only to “struggle” and “strive.” (The ultimate, even paradigmatic articulation of this position is T. S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which argues that scientists must relinquish the idea that their labors will bring them closer to the truth.)

The scientist must also relinquish the hope that this renunciation will produce any benefit for him. As Renan had noted, the scholar’s researches “do not contribute to make the author more perfect.” They will never result in any positive benefit for the scholar himself, for their only value is in the small contribution they make to “the grand current” of ideas circulating in the world (222). The scholar must publish, must become known, must get the word out, but must not seek personal glory. Such fame as accrues to him will be a kind of secondary fame, reflecting the general approbation accorded to the work itself, or to the findings or conclusions the work elucidates. Secondary or not, however, the desire for fame cannot be denied, for it is only through dissemination that the work itself, and the ethos in which the work was produced, will spread. And so, the desire for fame, which is already present in Athanasius, is essential to science as well: not merely a permissible impurity for the scholar/scientist who immolates himself on the altar of objectivity, it is in fact a mandatory and fundamental virtue.

## **BEYOND PERFECTION**

We are culpable, and it feels good to be culpable. It assures us that we are good people, because we are the kind of people who feel bad about these sorts of things.

—James Dawes, *That the World May Know*

Fame is, of course, a vulgar term for a desire that might also be described as a wish to spread the good news, to help others achieve illumination, or to contribute to the advance of human understand-

ing. Some form of this desire has always been in force in the Western regime of knowledge predicated on the exchange of pain for truth. This fact is virtually announced in the title of the last text I will consider in detail, an astonishing book published in 2007: *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity*. Written by James Dawes, a tenured English professor at Macalaster College, a wealthy but morally serious private liberal arts college in Minnesota, this book describes human rights and humanitarian workers on the front lines of intervention, in faraway places where genocide, rape, dismemberment, torture, and all manner of atrocities are taking place, mostly out of the world's sight. The people Dawes interviews are remarkable individuals, and Dawes himself has undertaken a remarkable project: to render visible the work they do, including the stories they tell themselves and others, to describe the ways in which they document and represent horror, to force our gaze to fix on what it desperately wants to avoid, to take in what is going on in some of the darkest places of the earth. While Dawes's book does not have the stature of *The Life of Antony* or *The Future of Science*, it will serve in this instance as a useful if provisional indicator of the present moment.

Dawes clearly writes from within an ascetic ethos in which personal comfort and ease must be sacrificed in service to a larger cause. But we can glimpse in Dawes's book something beyond the ethos of objectivity, and beyond the belief that the way to truth leads, as Simone Weil put it, through "annihilation." Animating *That the World May Know* is the conviction that truth is the first casualty not only of war, but of suffering in general. As Dawes notes, conflicts involving human rights violations include within them conflicts over terminology: officials may, for example, describe certain acts as "acts of genocide" but resist the phrase "genocidal acts," and refuse altogether the term "genocide." Nor can the victims themselves speak the simple truth of their suffering for they are, as Dawes says, typically reduced to an abject humiliated silence. A description of the abuses inflicted on them must often in effect be extracted from them, so that the human rights workers who

interview them often become aware that they are simply re-interrogating people who have already been terrorized by hostile interrogators.

The language produced under these circumstances is typically contorted, fragmented, and inexact. Some victims, and some who would speak for victims, resort to metaphorical, dramatic, or fictional narrative discourse in an attempt to render the truth of an experience that cannot find expression in any other kind of speech. The human rights workers cannot speak fictively, of course. They must try to render the truth of suffering in the dry language of reports. But aseptic factual representations can seem not only untruthful in their failure to register the experience they describe, but also almost as brutally dehumanizing as the acts they describe. Merely cataloguing the crimes—“forcing prisoners to have intercourse with spouses in the presence of security officers, to perform sexually taboo practices, including intercourse with friends of the same sex or with one’s own children; beating the genitals, squeezing and twisting testicles and nipples; rape by single or multiple assailants, rape with blunt or sharp objects”—can seem to the workers charged with the task like piling one more atrocity on top of the others (79).

So in addition to renouncing worldly or interpretive ease, Dawes also renounces objectivity. Beyond these renunciations, he even surrenders the view that suffering produces a moral benefit. He undertakes what might be regarded as the ultimate renunciation out of fidelity to his subject-informants, the human rights workers themselves. They find themselves, generally at immense personal sacrifice, in the most dire situations the world has to offer, doing work of extraordinary difficulty, dubious effectiveness, and—the perfection of renunciation—questionable moral value. They triage, segregating the desperately needy who are refugees from the merely desperately needy. They observe interrogations, and list the methods used. They separate people into groups, thereby determining what sort of assistance people will get, even though all need assistance of every kind. They require people who have been devastated to fill out forms; they

fill out forms themselves. They force people who wish to remain silent for reasons of shame, dignity, or trauma to tell their stories, perhaps to no effect other than to raise (generally false) hopes among the victims that someone might listen and act. During their hours off, they get drunk and have sex, and mock their own past idealism. They speak casually, even cynically, of the sufferings of the victims, many of whom they suspect of lying. They engage in what Dawes calls “degenerative cycles” of behavior (2007: 91).

They are aware that their presence in a country enables governments that are engaging in unspeakably horrible behavior to claim that they have invited international observers and humanitarian organizations. They know, too, that the sense of outrage and empathy that led them to the work in the first place would, if expressed, prevent them from doing it effectively, and so must be suppressed. They understand that they are part of a larger system of violence and oppression, and worry that even if they persuaded the world to attend with proper moral horror to what is going on, the emphasis on individual rights might lead to an indifference to broader reforms that would be predicated on the general good. They fear that they are an instrument of the reach and power of the West. They understand that some of the people they see get the impression that the presence of human rights workers means that the world cares about them when it does not, and that justice will eventually be done when it will not. Many human rights workers realize that they carry on only because they have become unable to reintegrate into the ordinary world. Some wonder if they have simply become addicted to the pathetic spectacle of human suffering, or to perpetual crisis. With experience, most seem to understand that they came to the work out of youthful moral vanity, and that by remaining they have become parasitic on trauma. They know that when they attempt to tell the stories of the people they see, they erase a great deal and aestheticize the rest.

In telling the story of those who tell the stories, Dawes attempts to get close enough to their experience so that he can speak as it were

from the inside. In a distanced and mediated way, he shares their thoughts and feelings, which motivate his own work. "This chapter," he writes at one point, "is about what it is like to be the person who maintains such a list [of means of interrogation], the person whose job it is to document pain, to bring it into language . . . as a daily bureaucratic routine in established institutional structures" (79-80). His book represents, therefore, one of the purest acts of renunciation in the history of scholarship. He has sacrificed his liberal-arts college routines, he has devoted himself to the cause of those in need. While he does not believe that objective and adequate representation can be achieved in the case of human rights violations, he has committed himself to the close study of language, approaching it without illusions.

Most important, he has mimicked the moral uncertainty of human rights workers themselves, renouncing even the belief that his work does any good at all. So convincing is his account of the negative consequences both real and feared of the human rights movement, so compelling is its depiction of the wracking self-doubt of the workers on the front lines of suffering, that one leaves his book wondering whether there ought to be such a movement at all, wondering whether the entire vast and well-funded project is nothing more than an immense, self-congratulating waste of time and effort. And yet, with all these renunciations, Dawes has not renounced the desire for fame, at least for fame of the sort that is secured through publication with the prestigious Harvard University Press. The one positive conviction emerging from *That the World May Know* is that the world should know. What the world chooses to do with the information is almost a matter of indifference, given the moral ambivalence of the entire situation, an ambivalence underscored by the odd fact "That the World May Know" is a registered trademark, the title of a video series issued by the right-wing religious-political organization Focus on the Family.

It is difficult to imagine a more fragile justification for the asceticism required of the scholar than the simple desire to let the world know about something. There must, one thinks, be something else that moti-

vates Dawes, and Harvard University Press, to undertake this demanding and expensive project. What might that remaining fragment of unrenounced value consist in? Why would people pay to read not just morally reassuring accounts of atrocity, but the much more equivocal and disturbing accounts of the despair, self-doubt, hopelessness, even shame of those who attempt to intervene in a small, virtually negligible, and perhaps complicit way in atrocity? How should “the world” calculate the value in such knowledge? Where, in particular, is the value in Dawe’s book?

The crucial fact in the conversion of pain into knowledge, and therefore in the creation of value, is choice, which transforms mere suffering into a mark of mental strength. By providing a sense of direction and purpose, volition distinguishes saints, scientists, and scholars from the anonymous hordes of humanity who simply make up the weight, suffering the human condition. Some forms of pain are simply too intense or immediate to be converted by volition. The experience of having one’s arms cut off will not by itself produce a gain in knowledge or virtue. And even the human rights workers who choose to work with the victims of abuse do not always succeed in converting suffering into knowledge. According to Dawes, most human rights workers experience the debilitating sense that they have chosen their work for reasons that are corrupt or unworthy. The value of Dawes’s work is more manifest because it is freely chosen in obedience to an admirable purpose: to let the world know. Unlike some of his subjects, his relation to his work is not pathological. And then there are Dawes’s readers, who enjoy a perfect freedom of selection. What they get for their \$19.95 is the valuable and even edifying opportunity to observe and sympathize with a range of suffering, including that of the victims and the workers, and also that of a morally and intellectually gifted young man who descends into the abyss, and then frames and records his experiences in unflinching detail. Beginning in suffering and ending in information, Dawes’s book constitutes a display of the ways that self-imposed discipline can convert pain into knowledge.

Life is hard. But the human condition is not defined by suffering

alone. To be human is to think, and thinking of suffering is the beginning of converting it into nonsuffering, which has come to be called knowledge. An obscure virtue has accrued to knowledge, in large measure because, long ago, religion claimed for itself possession of asceticism, which is actually a deeper determinant than any theology could be in the constitution of human being. The West does not own asceticism, or even religious asceticism. But the West has been conspicuously successful in adapting asceticism to a postreligious climate in the forms of science and scholarship. It is almost painfully counterintuitive, but absolutely necessary, that we regard this immense achievement as the result of renunciation, and that we recognize the deep currents of continuity flowing between suffering, bodily and mental, and such pleasurable cognitive experiences as understanding and enlightenment.

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