

John Keats: “When I Have Fears”

About which the commentator reverses himself

This is an odd essay. I begin heading in one direction only to find myself, along the way, heading in an entirely different direction. Poems can be like that, not only elucidating the world to us and revealing us to ourselves, but encouraging dialogue: and dialogue as we all know is open-ended. Who knows where we will be left after the interlocution is over And a warning: this is more political, overtly political, than any other letter I have written.

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high piled books, in charact'ry,
Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain;
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love!—then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.

John Keats wrote the sonnet, “When I have fears that I may cease to be” in 1818. In it he meditates, correctly it turns out, that he may die before his time. He died of tuberculosis in 1821, at the age of 25.

Contrary to my usual practice, I will not consider this poem in its entirety, nor will I go through it line by line. I call your attention to its conclusion: a phrase and the final couplet.

then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.

Keats is aware, close to death as he is, even at twenty-two, that all palls before the thought that he may no longer ‘be.’ Much of the poem is about how his poetry cannot keep pace with all he has in his brain, all that he wants to write or might

someday write. There is also an extended reference to the love of his life, Fanny Brawne, and how an awareness of looming early death underlines the possibility that love might not last forever.

I address this poem because there is much to say about the “wide world” that we live in. Too often I become so immersed in poems that I do not say it.

I’ve just finished reading John Le Carré’s most recent novel, *Agent Running in the Field*. It is one of the characteristics of fiction, and of all the arts, that sometimes through art we recognize a truth we had not realized, or had not wanted to realize. So it was for me at one moment in the novel.

A character, Ed Shannon, offers the following assessment. Shannon is of course *a* character who appears in *a* fiction. It is always possible he could be a fictional construct we are intended to ignore. Additionally, Ed Shannon is slightly over-the-top. Slowly, the narrator himself moves toward believing Shannon is right to be concerned about the world that they live in, which is the world Le Carré is writing in. We, guided by this narratorial understanding, also recognize that Shannon is, while uncongenial, ethical. Here is Shannon:

[Donald Trump] is presiding over the systematic no-holds-barred Nazification of the United States.

This is a bald and straightforward judgment. Shannon states that the American nation is well underway towards not just fascism, but ‘Nazification.’ Bracing, that judgment, shocking. But, for me, the shock resides in the unwelcome fact that it is true, that this sentence says something I too often shrink from expressing or even thinking.

Love and fame and all else, “to nothingness do sink,” as Keats avers when he considers what dying means. But the problem with looking at things *sub specie aeternitatis* is that we may miss what is happening around us as we live in today’s world. We are, as I said to my friend Fred the other day in referring to global warming, like that proverbial frog who sits in a kettle as the water warms, slowly, ever so slowly, until it boils and he is (without even realizing) boiled to death.

Reading poems, talking about them, writing about them, is seductive. I do that, read poems, not only because reading them gives me pleasure, but because I am convinced that we all too often miss the great truths of our lives, and only thinking – hard – about the words of others can reveal the truths that we are too rushed, or too self-absorbed, to actually *see*.

Somehow, though, many of the largest truths of our times slide away. Le Carré is right. The United States is moving headlong into Nazism. Not everyone who will read this essay will agree, but I think the statement needs to be taken seriously. As for me, I think it is, most unhappily, correct. Nazification.

In addition, the planet is warming so rapidly that soon we will be overcome by climate catastrophe. The rich and the powerful control almost everything, while no nation seems able to check the power of multinational corporations. Massive amounts of information about each of us is collected, sorted, and put to nefarious uses. Democracy and truth, those shibboleths we lived and believed in – and which many died for – are quaint concepts now, weak and almost indefensible in a world of autocracy and endless lies.

This is not a pretty picture. For the most part we ignore these stubborn truths even though they shape a valid perspective on our world. “Humankind cannot bear very much reality,” T. S. Eliot wrote. I don’t particularly like Eliot, nor the *Four Quartets* in which this line appears, but what he said has a deep cogency. We flee from what disquiets us, even if that disquiet is well-founded.

Let me start with what we know.

Our planet is warming. From this warming will ensue increasingly unpredictable weather, rising sea levels, and emergencies of all sorts. The wealthy and the comfortable live on high ground, or else they have flood insurance on their sea-side estates, so if they are flooded they can build their estates again. But in the next several decades we will see millions and millions of people uprooted by flood, forced from farming by inescapable drought, barely surviving (or dying) with fierce hunger as crops fail and drinking water disappears or becomes saline. (The current fires in Australia are just one harbinger of what is ahead of us.)

Where will the uprooted go? One can easily, alas, foresee masses – massed tens of millions – of refugees. Yet today, even before the worst catastrophes, almost every country is increasingly committed to walls and shuttered gates. I have no solution for this impending crisis when desperate refugees must leave where they and their children are living, except that I know the crisis is coming. What do we say about, to, those fleeing the ravages of a warming climate who will be headed our way?

Today, we most emphatically do not say, ‘Let’s stop the momentum toward global warming.’ Donald Trump says humanly caused climate change does not exist. Corporations say, ‘Let’s not concern ourselves with the future, today’s

bottom line should be our only guide.’ Nation after nation says, ‘It’s not really our problem.’ (Consider: China and India keep building coal-fired electric generation plants, and Australia keeps shipping them coal, while the wonderful nations of Canada and Norway slow their domestic use of fossil fuel – only to send more and more of their fossil fuel abroad. There seems no nation that is willing to step up and recognize the problem facing humankind. Well, there is the teenager Greta Thunberg and like her many millions of young people of vision and concern, but no nation. None.)

Arable land will be hit with years-long drought. Fires will rage as the rains fail to come. Cities will be inundated. Farmland will be poisoned by seawater.

People will flee. But where will they go?

Climate change is not the only problem which besets us. The globe’s wealth is not, in any way, equitably shared. My friend Bernie Sanders says, time and again, that “The three wealthiest people in this nation own more wealth than the bottom half of the American people.” His statement is, sadly, true. The rich have gotten richer, and the rest of Americans – almost all of them it turns out – face a financial decline so severe that for most in the United States life is a constant economic struggle. A shocking report from the U.S. Federal Reserve Board says that four in every ten Americans could not pay a \$400 bill if it were delivered to their door.

It is not the United States alone that is characterized by disparities of wealth. All over Europe and South America – in fact, all over the world – there is an agglomeration of wealth in the hands of a few who live among a large and asset-less mass of citizens. Nor are things getting more equitable. To summarize Thomas Piketty’s famous book, *Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century*, if the pie does not keep growing rapidly, the only way wealthy people can increase their wealth is to increase the slices of pie that they take for themselves.

So ever and ever larger portions of the world’s resources go to a very small handful of people. And the dispossessed? They get angry at Mexicans, or Jews, or Moslems. They find themselves embattled and think the battle lines should be drawn over their right to own a gun, or to keep gay people in their place. As threats become more extreme, the answer everywhere seems to be to retreat into narrow nationalism and an atavistic defense of one’s community.

As a response to the ongoing crises, we sometimes hear about philanthropy. Bill Gates and Warren Buffett sort of embrace it, though not by giving away all

they have, nor by renouncing their efforts to garner yet more profits. And they are the ‘good’ guys. Basically the wealthy do not help those less fortunate than themselves. Enrichment, personal enrichment, is the aim of those who are already well-off. The dispossessed of the world can fare for themselves.

Perhaps the lauded capitalist drive towards wealth could be countenanced (though not by me) if there were what is called a ‘level playing field,’ if all had the opportunity to take care of themselves and their families. But the field is not level. Big money buys its prerogatives, making sure that legislation and the courts always favor the empowered. Big money buys politicians. It buys bureaucratic regulators. Not only in what we regard as tawdry third-world countries, but in the so-called liberal democracies of the world. Corporate powers shape the media, and elections, and the ways we think about ourselves. Power and money rule. The large portion of us are powerless.

We may wishfully think that democracy is a counter to this savage movement toward autocracy, but the rise of election interference, social media manipulation, and the undermining of truth undermine what were formerly the preconditions of democratic choice. The claims of ‘fake news’ are especially noteworthy. Those claims make it impossible for us to credit what formerly were ‘facts,’ so that facts disappear as just another package of information. (It is noteworthy that those who purvey the notion of ‘fake news’ almost always are the very people who want to undermine the obduracy of facts.)

The power of corporations seems to transcend national boundaries. I was heartened, recently, by Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, who wrote,

Tax avoidance, international tax competition and the race to the bottom that rage today are not laws of nature. They are policy choices, decisions we’ve collectively made.... contrary to received wisdom ...the taxation of capital and globalization are perfectly compatible.

But I do not think, even if we here in the United States were to elect Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren, who have both called for wealth taxes and much higher taxes on corporations, that what Saez/Zucman support as policy choices will come to pass. Too many laws, too many courts, too many legislators, too many modes of communication, are deeply indebted to the interventions of the wealthy and those powers who run the corporate world. Redistributing wealth through progressive taxation will, at the very best, be only partial. Very partial.

In the United States, the Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United* made it legal for large corporations to buy up the electoral process. According to the Court, the ability to spend huge sums of money is an exercise of free speech. Against this logic there is that of A. J. Liebling, who famously wrote of freedom of the press, another pillar of democracy, “Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.” It is a universal truth, that freedom does not easily coexist with the deployment of large amounts of money.

It may have seemed at one time that the emergence of the internet would be a corrective to this centralization of communicative power. But two things happened along the way to a democratic dissemination of information. One is well known, the other – well, not so much.

What we all know is that misinformation, not information, rules the internet. Without referees there is no way to tell solid news from fake news. (In a different context, I love unmetered verse, which I find to be supple and able to follow the language that people actually speak, but I am reminded that Robert Frost once said of free verse, “I’d just as soon play tennis with the net down.”) Misinformation rules, and it turns out that misinformation can be reproduced and amplified by ‘bots.’ Don’t ask me how, for I am not really tech-savvy. All I know is that misinformation rules, and not without purpose. Powerful forces provide misinformation and purvey it to people in order to serve the interests of the purveyor. Further, those who produce misinformation are financially rewarded when their blatantly false claims draw, well, eyeballs and advertising payments.

Another danger to the internet has emerged. Whenever we go to the web to look for something, or at something, we create what was once called ‘digital exhaust.’ A record of what interests us, where we are, what we want, is created. And through the use of what are called ‘algorithms,’ a fancy word for formulas which sort through large troves of information to find specific patterns, who we are and what we want and how we act and how we desire is, now, all available to anyone who wants to buy ‘knowledge’ of us and our inner lives. Our individual genetic signature is increasingly available through DNA testing and the ubiquity of the web.

Combined with the increasing use of photographic surveillance – also sorted by algorithms – and the digital tracking of our cellphones’ location, we are increasingly captives of those with access to such information. As was recently revealed, a small company sells software that can connect images of people (i.e., a photo of yourself) with their names, addresses, and other identifying signifiers.

Who are those who have access to this information? Alas, the state and the corporate world. *Our lives are no longer our own.* That is a pleasant long-gone fiction, outdated by the vast intrusion of the world wide web into our lives.

My wife recently asked what I was doing, and I said I was writing an essay ‘on the modern world and how it sucks.’ “I don’t think it is very good,” I told her. “Well, it’s a good topic,” she responded. Rightly.

Let’s go back to Keats: “Then on the shore/ Of the wide world I stand alone, and think/ Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.” Keats presents us with a tantalizing possibility. The poem ponders our own mortality and how it puts human life and aspiration into a dark perspective. But there is a parallel and destructive possibility: That we extend this “nothingness” to all of life. We can think with despair of the forces that shape how we live, and move from that despair to a dire pessimism. A drive to embrace “nothingness” sometimes overcomes us in the face of the immense difficulties which we face.

In one of the most remarkable passages in American literature, two-thirds of the way through “Song of Myself” Whitman tells himself and his readers, “Enough! enough! enough!.... I discover myself on the verge of a usual mistake.”

He speaks for me, too.

I try not to be overly topical in these essays, since poems exist in some sense in ‘long time,’ rather than in the always-evolving and disappearing present. But I read an op-ed column recently, by Michelle Goldberg in the *New York Times*, that proposed that the great response to modern conditions – global warming, Trump and the rise of soft fascism everywhere, loss of control over one’s world – may be profound depression. A sense of weariness, a sense that all is hopeless, a sense that action is not only inappropriate but also doomed to failure.

I think, as I started this essay, that such depression was where I was headed. I was going to write on how true the ending of Keats’s poem was: “Till Love and Fame to nothingness do shrink.”

Three paragraphs earlier I was echoing Ralph Ellison. He wrote in *Invisible Man*, “Who knows but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” When we speak, we often speak for others. I think that is one of the essential springs from which literature emerges, and it often is the reason why we read the work of others: “I speak for you.”

I trust in this instance Ellison is wrong. “Nothingness” is not a viable option for living in this world of ours.

My deep awareness – hope? – is that I am addressing myself and not many of you who receive these essays, who struggle to make a better world. Many, including myself in my brighter moments, believe what Martin Luther King said: “Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” More than believe. Many, like him, work to make the things of our world bend toward justice.

Yet somehow Keats’s thoughts of nothingness are, unhappily, what often preoccupies me as I ponder seemingly irreversible global warming, the immense power of corporations and the wealthy, the unhappy future of the ‘internet,’ and the decline of democracy and democratic ideals.

The nihilism of Keats makes sense as he recognizes, over a century before Heidegger, that death defines what human life means. But does this nihilism make sense as we confront the problems which beset humankind?

It is all too easy to slip into a larger embrace of Keats’s conclusion to his sonnet, “till Love and Fame to nothingness do shrink.” We sometimes too easily embrace nihilism as problems grow larger and seem increasingly insoluble. Hang tight: I am going to dive into philosophy and the history of thought in the next portion of this letter. Bear with me, for we will indeed return to Keats.

There is a way other than nihilism to look at what confronts us. To see that other way, we must go back a long way into human history, long before Keats, even before Socrates. The ancient Greek philosopher and rhetorician Protagoras said, “Of all things, the measure is man: of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not.”

This assertion of Protagoras is most often interpreted by philosophers as a statement of relativism, that things *are* as they appear to observers. (The significance of this for Albert Einstein, two millennia later, should not be underestimated. For Einstein, all things but the one constant – the speed of light – depended on who was observing, and from where. That was the essential underpinning of his theory of relativity.)

I want, however, to focus on another aspect of Protagoras, which leads to the conclusion that everything exists in the flow of time, that everything is historical. Perhaps someday I will write about a very difficult poem, a most

wonderful poem, by Elizabeth Bishop, called “At the Fish-Houses.” For now, though, here is how it ends.

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown

I am never sure what, exactly she is saying, or what the poem says. But I am sure that the subject, “knowledge,” is described by the predicate, “historical.” All we know is known in time, in its historical density. And that historical density is what we live in, even though it feels us like a very concrete *present*. Even though we know the present is ever-changing.

An important perspective on historicity comes down to us through Baruch Spinoza, in his *Tractatus Politico-Philosophicus*, and through Giambattista Vico, in his *Scienza Nuova*. Both philosophers maintained that we see, experience, in a particular historical condition. Humans create history, even if for both philosophers – well, Vico for sure – God and the universe are important too. Still, it follows that humans can shape the history they live in.

As one commentary on Vico describes his stance toward knowledge and the world, “since we are the cause of what we make, we can know what was made. Since humans have made the civil world, they can understand the cause of the civil world and know the truth about it.” Vico expressed this more enigmatically when he wrote in his *Ancient Wisdom*, “For the Latins, *verum* (the true) and *factum* (what is made) are interchangeable, or to use the customary language of the Schools, they are convertible.”

I have tried, a number of times, to read Vico. He writes really tough stuff. I appreciate him not directly, but because long ago I read what Edmund Wilson had to say about him in *To the Finland Station*. For Wilson, the Marxist tradition begins with Vico, because Vico insisted that God’s world was knowable only to God, whereas the human world was knowable to humans because humans created it. And what we can know, we can change.

I’m venturing into history because the Vichean argument bears strongly on our present predicaments. If what we face are things which are humanly created, we can understand them and, most importantly, change them. What humans have

made, humans can reverse. Government, laws, social practices: These are within our realm to make.

What has been made can be un-made, or transformed, or changed for the better. Time is not reversible, and what is passed is past: but the future can be shaped not just by the past but by what we do in the present.

All of the ills I have enumerated, and which weigh me down, are humanly created. It is within our capacity to change them.

If we have warmed this world of ours, we can also change our societies to slow down global warming, and even reverse it. But to save our planet and ourselves we must limit the carbon we emit into the atmosphere.

If our laws permitted and even encouraged corporations to grow larger and more centralized and more powerful, our laws can be transformed so that we curtail not just the size of corporate power, but its growth. (This, it seems to me, is what Elizabeth Warren is telling us.)

If the wealthy control our political lives and choices, we can reduce their wealth and so restrict the power of the wealthy. (This, it seems to me, is what Bernie Sanders is telling us.)

If the internet, which developed within a framework of laws and regulatory decisions, intrudes aggressively in our personal lives, we can change those laws and make new regulatory decisions. (The European Union is trying to do this.)

None of these changes are easy to effect. Hardest of all is to reverse the emergence of fascism in nations everywhere. (I began, much earlier, with my shock at encountering the sentence that Donald Trump “is presiding over the systematic no-holds-barred Nazification of the United States.”)

Men and women today, all over the world, feel themselves threatened by the rapid pace of change. They throw themselves back on what they know: their tribe, their glorified past, a sense of a self that is defined by what the self is not. They say to their selves, their deepest selves, ‘I am not a Mexican, I am not a Muslim, I am not an immigrant.’

The roots of fascism are very deep in us. They grow in the soil of insecurity, and it is terribly hard to tell people to move forward when they see security in what they are asked to leave behind.

But we did it once. These days there is a deep animus towards the Enlightenment, towards the age of reason. Reason brought us the corporate

structure of modern economies, and bureaucracy, and what decades ago Norman Mailer trenchantly described as the logical outcome of reason, the “murderous liquidations of the totalitarian state.” For it took reason to construct the concentration camps and move millions of people into them, as my former colleague Raul Hilberg so magisterially described in his *The Destruction of the European Jews*.

Reason is usually opposed to our emotions, which connect us to our childhood and to each other. Much as I love Wordsworth, the great apostle of childhood and the emotional life, this deep dependence on emotion can be wrong. Emotion can often root us in ourselves, but to believe emotion is the only guide to our lives is folly. A willingness to discard reason because many of its fruits today seem oppressive ignores a historical occurrence of immense importance: Reason brought us a belief in democracy and equality.

The idea of popular and legally protected democracy and the conviction that “all men are created equal,” are concepts that men and women created in the eighteenth century, in the Enlightenment. We live in a time when intellectual doubt about the importance of ‘concepts’ in material history is widespread. Yet just because popular democracy and equality are ‘concepts’ does not mean that they did not shape history, and for the better.

We made these concepts, and what are called our ‘forefathers’ used them to shape a nascent nation. Now, today, we are losing them.

We can retrieve democracy and a commitment to equality. This will be extremely difficult. Democracy is tougher to uphold than atavism. Caring for the rights and needs of others is a harder path than barbaric and unashamed self-interest.

But we need not take the easiest and most superficially satisfying route. A large part of history of Western culture, from Christ through Kant’s ‘categorical imperative,’ to Levinas’s ‘self and the other,’ to Rawls’s theory of justice, is a movement to recognize the claims of others as equal to our own claims. I contend that it is this tradition, of a recognition that we share the world with others and those others have needs and rights as strong as ours, that we must uphold.

There is much to love in Keats’s poem. There is the lovely metaphor, which becomes a simile, in which his brain is portrayed as fruitful and his poems and potential poems are the nourishing repositories of the grain which can feed us. There is the adventure of life, which seems like a Romance or fairy tale as its

possibilities spread out before us. There is the sustaining power of love which can transform us even as it seeks not to transform (“Love alters not,” wrote John Donne). There is even his deep recognition that when death defines life, much that we hold dear seems unimportant. But that final conclusion is not a universal guide to life. It is a consideration of what mortality means, not of how to face the problems of this, our everyday world.

I began this essay thinking to elucidate on Keats’s conclusion, “Then on the shore/ Of the wide world I stand alone, and think/ Till Love and Fame to nothingness do shrink.” The line is seductive, very seductive: nothing matters, and all slides into the sea of nothingness. (I recall, with a shiver of what the sea may represent, that Freud equated the ‘oceanic feeling,’ with both the loss of ego and the embrace of death.)

But as you can see, as I was engaged in writing about the Keats poem and its conclusion, I realized that his ending is the wrong response to the immensity of problems which confront us. To give up the struggle for a better world – one whose climate is not increasingly hostile to human life, one not controlled by the rich and powerful, one not dominated by an internet self-interestedly used by corporations and the state, one that does not give sway to fascism and Nazism – is to embrace death.

We live in a historical world, a world in time. We can shape the future and not just lie down before it. It sounds large, maybe egomaniacal, maybe impossible, that we can shape our collective future. But as Thoreau once said – Thoreau is a great sayer of things – “Time is the stream I go a-fishing in.” He went on to say that time is shallow, and eternity lies beneath it. But I have, unlike Thoreau, little sense of eternity. Time, on the other hand, is what we live in. Time is what we fish in.

Time is what we have, and the future that will rise to meet us is in large part a future we can make. It is not “nothingness,” that word Keats invokes, but our historical future that we must face. And facing that future means taking responsibility for making changes in our world.

Long ago I wrote about a remarkable [sonnet](#) on Frederick Douglass by Robert Hayden. He imagines a Douglass committed to a better world which he intended to bring into being.

this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
beaten to his knees, exiled, **visioning a world**
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien

Such is the world we can envision, and work towards. Beats everything shrinking to nothingness.