ROBERT POGUE HARRISON

JUVENESCENCE

A Cultural History of Our Age

"Odd and brilliant."
—Scott McLemee, *Inside Higher Ed*

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PREFACE

This book grapples with a simple question that has no simple answer: how old are we? By "we" I mean those of us who belong to the age of juvenescence that began in America in the post-war period and gradually spread eastward, moving against the westerly drift of civilization that the ancients called *translatio imperii*.

There is no way to engage that question without probing the phenomenon of human age in all its bewildering complexity; for in addition to possessing a biological, evolutionary, and geological age, humans also possess a cultural age by virtue of the fact that they belong to a history that preceded their arrival in the world and will outlast their exit from it. Like other life forms, we humans undergo an aging process, yet the historical era into which we are born has a great deal to do with how that process unfolds, even at the biological level. We are a species that, for better or for worse, has transmuted evolution into culture, and vice versa. Thus a seemingly simple question — how old are we? — places us in an unfamiliar region where, among all the life forms on earth, we find ourselves alone and without definite coordinates.

Culture's powerful evolutionary force has gone into overdrive at present, transforming our kind in fundamental ways even as we speak. Genetically, humans have not changed for the past several thousand years, or so we're told, yet today's thirty-

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year-old woman on the tennis courts of San Diego seems more like the daughter than the sister of Balzac's *femme de trente ans*. In my father's college yearbook, I see the faces of fully grown adults the likes of which I never encounter among my undergraduates. In earlier ages, twelve-year-old boys looked like little adults, their faces furrowed by the depths of time. By contrast, the first-world face of today remains callow, even as it withers away with age, never attaining the strong senile traits of the elderly of other cultures or historical eras. The difference lies not merely in our enhanced diets, health benefits, and reduced exposure to the elements but in a wholesale biocultural transformation that is turning large segments of the human population into a "younger" species—younger in looks, behavior, mentality, lifestyles, and, above all, desires.

How is such juvenescence possible? Is there a biological substrate in our species-being that sponsors it? How can we be getting younger—as individuals as well as a society—even as we continue to age? And what future, if any, does our juvenilization have in store for us? These are questions that surround and traverse the core question of how old we are from the historical point of view. I have chosen to engage them through a multifaceted approach that takes into account the relevant biological and evolutionary factors, while keeping my primary focus on the broad lineaments of Western cultural history. Indeed, I have found it necessary to offer in these pages what amounts to a philosophy of history as well as a philosophy of age as such, for in the human realm age and history remain inextricably bound up with one another.

This book is at best ambivalent toward the unprecedented juvenescence that is sweeping over Western culture, and many other cultures as well. At the very least, I seek to gauge the risks it entails for our future, assuming we have one. As it convulses the historical continuum with increasing vehemence, our era has rendered the world an alien place for those who were not born into its neoteric novelties—for those who are not native to the new age, as it were. At the beginning of his "Doggerel by

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a Senior Citizen," W. H. Auden wrote, "Our earth in 1969 / Is not the planet I call mine." This feeling of world-expropriation has grown far more intense for many citizens of the planet since 1969. An older person has no idea what it means to be a child, an adolescent, or a young adult in 2014. Hence he or she is hardly able to provide any guidance to the young when it comes to their initiation into the ways of maturity or their induction into the public sphere, for which the young must eventually assume responsibility, or pay the consequences if they fail to do so. It has yet to be seen whether a society that loses its intergenerational continuity to such a degree can long endure.

One of the claims of this book is that our youth-obsessed society in fact wages war against the youth it presumably worships. It may appear as if the world now belongs mostly to the younger generations, with their idiosyncratic mindsets and technological gadgetry, yet in truth, the age as a whole, whether wittingly or not, deprives the young of what youth needs most if it hopes to flourish. It deprives them of idleness, shelter, and solitude, which are the generative sources of identity formation, not to mention the creative imagination. It deprives them of spontaneity, wonder, and the freedom to fail. It deprives them of the ability to form images with their eyes closed, hence to think beyond the sorcery of the movie, television, or computer screen. It deprives them of an expansive and embodied relation to nature, without which a sense of connection to the universe is impossible and life remains essentially meaningless. It deprives them of continuity with the past, whose future they will soon be called on to forge.

We do not promote the cause of youth when we infantilize rather than educate desire, and then capitalize on its bad infinity; nor when we shatter the relative stability of the world, on which cultural identity depends; nor when we oblige the young to inhabit a present without historical depth or density. The greatest blessing a society can confer on its young is to turn them into the heirs, rather than the orphans, of history. It is also the greatest blessing a society can confer on itself, for heirs rejuvenate

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the heritage by creatively renewing its legacies. Orphans, by contrast, relate to the past as an alien, unapproachable continent—if they relate to it at all. Our age seems intent on turning the world as a whole into an orphanage, for reasons that no one—least of all the author of this book—truly understands.

Juvenescence has no interest in promoting a doomsday vision of the future. I do not offer prophecies here, if only because our age makes it impossible to predict the outcome of the upheavals it relentlessly provokes. At present, no one can say whether the storm of juvenescence that has swept us up in the past several decades will lead to a genuine rejuvenation or a mere juvenilization of culture. All will depend on whether we find ways to bring forth new and younger forms of cultural maturity. Nothing is more important in this regard than resolving to act our age. I mean our historical age. The past does not cease to exist simply because we lose our memory of it. A multimillennial history lurks inside us, whether we are aware of it or not. We may be the "youngest" society in the history of human civilization, yet we are also the oldest—and getting older, decade by decade, century by century, millennium by millennium.

I faced two choices when I set out to write this book: to make it ponderously long or keep it mercifully short. I opted for the latter. Since I was also determined not to oversimplify the matters at hand, the result is a book that may seem at times baffling in its essayistic approach to a highly complex nexus of questions, yet I would not turn it over to the reader if I felt that it lacked an intrinsic narrative logic and inner core of coherence. It is a book that trusts its reader to stay the course, however circuitous it may be.

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I would like to thank Epicurus for his philosophy of gratitude, since being grateful for the has-been inoculates one against despair over the future. A love of Epicurus is one of the bonds I share with my friend and colleague Andrea Nightingale, to whom this book is dedicated and who, over the years, has read more drafts of its chapters than she or I can tally. I am grateful to my friend Antonia for her generosity (the other supreme Epicurean virtue) and for reading almost as many chapter drafts as Andrea. My thanks also go out to the following friends who read previous drafts of some of these chapters or offered special inspiration for them: Weixing Su, Samia Kassab, Florence Naugrette, Inga Pierson, Hans Gumbrecht, Laura Wittman, Heather Webb, Susan Stewart, Dan Edelstein, Pierre Saint-Amand, Rachel Falconer, Rachel Jacoff, Florian Klinger, Christy Wampole, Elizabeth Coggeshall, Niklas Damiris, Helga Wilde, Gabriele Pedullà, Dylan Montanari, and Kelly in Rome. Special thanks also to Yves Bonnefoy for inviting me to deliver a series of lectures at the Collège de France in May 2010. Those four lectures on "Le phénomène de l'age" allowed me to bring this book into much clearer focus. Finally, I am grateful to my editors Alan Thomas (University of Chicago Press), Sophie Bancquart (Le Pommier), and Michael Kruger (Hanser Verlag) for their encouragement and enthusiasm for this book.

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To the Reader

One of my extracurricular activities is hosting a radio show on Stanford University's radio station, KZSU 90.1. That show is called *Entitled Opinions (about Life and Literature)*, and for the better part of a decade, it has hosted hundreds of guests, in conversation about various intellectual topics. Since the topics and authors I deal with in this book have been the subjects of some of my radio shows, I would like to cite a few of the latter here as an audio supplement to my discussion in the pages that follow. All are available on the website http://www.stanford.edu/dept/fren-ital/opinions/ and as iTunes podcasts, downloadable for free: Karen Feldman, "On Hannah Arendt" (May 15, 2007); Thomas Harrison, "On the Emancipation of Dissonance" (March 7, 2006); Martin Lewis, "On the Discipline of Geography" (November 9, 2011); Andrew Mitchell, "On Martin Heidegger" (October 18, 2005) and "On Friedrich Nietzsche" (May 26, 2009); Andrea Nightingale, "On Plato" (November 25, 2009); Marjorie Perloff, "On the Poetry and Politics of Ezra Pound" (November 15, 2005) and "On W. B. Yeats" (March 18, 2008); Rush Rehm, "On Greek Tragedy" (March 15, 2011); Richard Saller, "On the Social Institutions of Ancient Rome" (October 26, 2011); Thomas Sheehan, "On the Historical Jesus" (January 21, 2006); Kathleen Sullivan, "On the Founding Scriptures of America" (May 2, 2006); and Caroline Winterer, "On Classicism in America" (January 18, 2011). Many other shows could be added to this list, yet these are the among the most pertinent ones for this book in the *Entitled Opinions* archive.

On Citations

This book does not contain numbered footnotes or endnotes. Notes and references have been consigned to the sections entitled "Notes" and "Works Cited" in the back matter.

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Both when young and old one should devote oneself to philosophy in order that while growing old he shall be young in blessings through gratitude for what has been. The life of the fool is marked by ingratitude and apprehension; the drift of his thought is exclusively toward the future. Forgetting the good that has been, he becomes an old man this very day.

EPICURUS

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* ONE *

Anthropos

The Intriguing Phenomenon of Age

Nothing in the universe—be it the newborn infant or the universe itself—is without age. If a phenomenon does not age it is not of this world; and if it is not of this world, it is not a phenomenon.

We have on the whole a poor understanding of the essence of age, perhaps because our intellect evolved to deal more with objects in space than with the enfolded intricacies of growth, duration, and accumulation. Certainly we find it easier to spatialize time—to think of it as a linear or chronological succession of present moments—than to fathom the multidimensional, interpenetrating recesses of age. Indeed, we have a stubborn tendency to reduce age to "time," yet what is time if not a prodigious abstraction, a *flatus vocis*? Only age gives time a measure of reality.

The most sophisticated philosophers think of age as a function of time, yet a careful phenomenological analysis reveals that we should instead think of time as a function of age. After all, any concept we may have of time has a way of growing old, of succumbing to an aging process. The same holds true for eternity, which shares in the general mortality of phenomena. Eternity no longer appears to us as it did to Plato, when he and his fellow Greeks turned their gaze to the stars. Nor does it appear to us as it did to Dante, when he and his fellow Christians contemplated the celestial spheres. Indeed, eternity has been largely

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subtracted from our ever-expanding cosmos, which we now believe had a beginning and will eventually have an end. Hence one could say that eternity has for all intents and purposes disappeared from our phenomenological horizons, that it has aged itself out of existence.

In *Creative Evolution* (1907) the French philosopher Henri Bergson exposed in compelling fashion traditional philosophy's stubborn tendency to conceive of time geometrically rather than organically, yet for all his deep thinking about *la durée* and organic form, Bergson never put forward a philosophy of age. He offered merely another philosophy of time—one founded on biological rather than chronological paradigms. That represented a significant corrective and contribution, to be sure, yet there is more to the phenomenon of age than biology can account for, for humans are biological beings who create transbiological institutions that put cultural and historical elements into play in ways that Bergson, along with most other philosophers, leaves largely unexamined.

All living things obey an organic law of growth and decay, and in that respect human beings are no exceptions. According to the riddle of Sphinx, we walk on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and, if we live long enough, end up on three legs in the evening. Yet after he enters the city of Thebes, confident that he has solved the riddle, Oedipus discovers that there is far more to the story than that. The story in fact begins before birth and continues after death. In other words, unlike other living things, *anthropos* is born into humanly created worlds whose historical past and future transcend the individual's lifespan. These worlds, which the Greeks called the *polis*, are founded upon institutional and cultural memory, conferring upon their inhabitants a historical age that is altogether different in nature than biological age. Since no human being lives outside of such worlds, with their legacies and traditions, we could say that humans are by nature "heterochronic" in their age, that is, they possess many diverse kinds of ages: biological, historical, institutional, psychological. By and by we will see how these vari-

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ous "ages" intersect with one another—both in individuals and in civilizations—yet here let us simply note for the record that, once *anthropos* arrives on the scene, the phenomenon of age increases in complexity as least as much as it did when life first gained a foothold on our planet.

The one thinker from whom one would expect an explosive philosophy of age, especially as it relates to the human component, is Martin Heidegger. Heidegger thought more radically about time than any philosopher before or after him, yet he too, like the metaphysical tradition he labored to overcome, had little to say about age. Heidegger taught us that time is ostensive—that it is a kind of movement, or *kinesis*, that allows the phenomenon to appear and be taken up in thought and word. He also taught us that time's disclosive dynamism has its source in Dasein's finite temporality. Why he made no effort to link Dasein's temporality to its age, even in the straightforward sense of the stages of life, is hard to fathom, for when it comes to Dasein's existential determinations, age remains as fundamental as thrownness, projection, fallenness, being-unto-death, and being-with-others. Yet for some reason in *Being and Time*, as well as in Heidegger's later thought, Dasein remains essentially ageless.

I find this surprising because one could say that age is to time what place is to space. Nowhere in his corpus is Heidegger more compelling than when he reveals how place, in its situated boundedness, is more primordial than space. In exemplary phenomenological fashion he shows how the scientific concept of homogeneous space derives from, or is made possible by, Dasein's disclosure of the "there" of its own situated being. One would have expected from Heidegger a similar analysis of how age, in its existential and historical primordiality, figures as the measure, if not the source, of Dasein's finite temporality and, with it, of the chronologically governed concept of time. Such an analysis would have given him the occasion to show that the constant finishing action of time takes place in and through the unfolding of age, day in and day out, year in and year out, era

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after era, epoch after epoch. Unfortunately, nowhere in his corpus does Heidegger ponder age as the boundary of finitude that allows time, in its ostensive character, to disclose the world of phenomena.

Let me briefly attempt to point out how much goes unaccounted for, phenomenologically speaking, when one fails to ground time in age, or to derive the former from the latter.

I would begin by remarking that every phenomenon has its age, or better, its *ages*. Why the plural? Because entities become phenomena only where they are perceived, intended, or apprehended. Hence the phenomenon brings together at least two independent yet intersecting ages: the age of the entity and the age of the apprehender. A young boy and his grandfather in an old-growth forest of the Pacific Northwest may cast their eyes on the same giant redwood, yet they do not see the same phenomenon. Because of their age difference, it appears one way to the boy, another to his elder. The sky I see today is more or less the same blue spectacle it always was, yet it's not the same sky of old. When I was seven it was my body's covenant with the cosmos; by twenty it became the face of an abstraction; today it's the dome of a house I know I will not inhabit for too much longer; shortly it will be the answer to what today still remains a question.

It does no good to say that I "project" my age onto phenomena. The sky has always appeared to me as something ageless; yet its agelessness appears differently as I age. My only access to the sky, and to the world of phenomena in general, is from within my own noncelestial age. If identity means self-sameness through time, age is the latent element that introduces a differential into identity's equation, hence into the appearance of things. To express the same thought in slightly different terms: I do not lend the phenomenon my age; rather, the phenomenon reaches me through forms of reception and perception that pertain to my age. One could speak in a more Kantian vein and say that time is not the same form of intuition in childhood as it is

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in adulthood, or that the imagination schematizes time differently in youth than it does in old age.

Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "Spring and Fall," where an older speaker addresses a young girl, gives poetic expression to what I have stated more prosaically about the age differential in the phenomenon's self-manifestation:

> Margaret, are you grieving
> Over Goldengrove unleaving?
> Leaves, like the things of man, you
> With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
> Ah! as the heart grows older
> It will come to such sights colder
> By and by, nor spare a sigh
> Though world of wanwood leafmeal lie;
> And yet you will weep and know why.
> Now no matter, child, the name:
> Sorrow's springs are the same.
> Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
> What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
> It was the blight man was born for,
> It is Margaret you mourn for.

Although Margaret's emotions here lack credibility—young girls do not typically shed tears over the falling of autumn leaves—the poem draws attention to two important phenomenological facts. The first is that the aging process effects changes in the phenomenon's perception. The second is that human perception is, at some level, always a self-perception. The difference between the child and the adult in the poem is that the adult presumably knows "why" he weeps, while Margaret presumably does not. She has yet to understand that "sorrow's springs are the same."

That last assertion may in fact be dubious, or even downright false—sorrow's springs are *not* always the same—yet the truth

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of Hopkins's poem lies not in its propositional claims but in its revelation that, as the heart grows older, the same phenomenon accrues a different meaning: a meaning intimately bound up with the age of the perceiver.

The Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi also held that things appear differently to perception with age. In his pessimistic worldview, youth has a tendency to see infinite promise in the phenomena of nature. Autumn leaves, moonlight, the open sea—these are intimations of future happiness. By inviting youth to experience its beauty in the mode of promise, nature is unspeakably cruel, since that promise is and always was only an *inganno*, a deception. As he puts it in his poem "A Silvia": "O natura, o natura. / Perchè non rendi poi / quel che prometti allor? Perchè di tanto / Inganni i figli tuoi?" ("O nature, o nature. Why do you not deliver on what you promised back then? Why do you deceive your children so?"). In Hopkins's case, age reveals in time the implicit truth naively perceived in the phenomenon by a young girl; in Leopardi's case, it reveals in time the deception that was implicit in the naïve perception of youth. Again, neither one nor the other vision need be empirically "true." What is important—at least for our purposes—is that, unlike the history of philosophy, the history of poetry offers an abundance of phenomenological insight into the way truth reveals itself in and through the unfolding of age.

If time is disclosive of truth, as Heidegger maintained, and if truth in turn is age-bound, as I maintain, then what is absolutely true at one stage of life is at best only relatively true at another. When I first read the opening verses of T. S. Eliot's *The Four Quartets* many years ago, I had no doubts that I had stumbled upon the timeless truth of time itself:

> Time present and time past
> are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.
> If all time is eternally present
> all time is unredeemable.

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What might have been is an abstraction
remaining a perpetual possibility
only in a world of speculation.

For a young person, Eliot's lines about the "might have been" resound with an ominous oracular truth. It puts enormous pressure on one to take seriously Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return of the same (i.e., that we are fated to repeat all the moments in our life over and over again, eternally), or to take Rilke at his word when he writes, in his ninth *Duino Elegy*, "Us the most fleeting. Once / everything, only *once*. *Once* and no more. And we, too, / *once*. Never again." These theses—eternal return and the "once only"—sympathize with one another, in that both affirm that reality consummates itself in the real, and only in the real. Yet the truth of that proposition holds far more sway over a young person than an older person, if only because the former feels under a much greater imperative to realize his or her potential than does an older person, whose life, for better or worse, has already begun winding down toward a narrative conclusion, even if it has not yet reached a biological end.

While I believe that the real shines forth as the crown of the possible, I am no longer convinced, as I was when I first read Eliot's lines, that the possible finds its redemption only in actualization. I have arrived at an age where the relation between time and reality has undergone a shift that makes me more prone to believe that the punctuality of our lived moments are like sparks arising from, and returning to, that indeterminate source that the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander called the *apeiron*, the unbounded matrix. This *apeiron* is not nothingness. Nor is it an "abstraction remaining a perpetual possibility only in a world of speculation." Its overbearing potentiality penetrates the phenomenon and gives it depth, density, and opacity, suffusing it with a recessive latency of unrealized potential. I could put the same thought differently by saying that this vast ocean of potentiality on which actuality drifts like a single glass wave gives buoyancy and depth to our experience of the real.

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There are further complexities at work in the human inflections of age. If I say I am sixty years old, what exactly does that mean? What or who is this I? Is it a body, a mind, a soul, or an aggregate of the three? Even if, for the sake of argument, we call it only a body, we are still not dealing with a simple sum. My body is at once sixty years old and several billion years old, since all of its atoms originated a few seconds after the Big Bang, hence are as old as the universe itself. Moreover, a body does not age uniformly in all its parts. The age of a weak heart is not that of a sound kidney. One may turn old in one part of the body and stay young in another over the course of years. As John Banville's protagonist remarks about his Italian neighbors in the novel *Shroud*: "They age from the top down, for these are still the legs ... they must have had in their twenties or even earlier" (3–4). In sum, the body too is heterochronic.

My body contains a brain. Is my brain the same age as my mind? Surely not, for unlike the brain, my mind is linked by affiliation and inheritance to other minds, both past and present. In Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter" we read, "My mind, because the minds that I have loved, / The sort of beauty that I have approved, / Prosper but little, has dried up of late ..." Like Yeats, I have loved minds as old as Anaximander and Plato. That makes my mind, whose thought is informed by theirs, over two thousand years old. Whether that makes it older or younger than my brain is anybody's guess.

As for my soul—or what used to be called the soul, before it curled up and disappeared from the scene of history—I am at least as old as Moses, Homer, and Dante, whose legacies form part of my psychic selfhood. And if I am ever reduced to searching the depths of my unconscious, I will most likely find that I am also as old as the archetypes of prehistoric myth.

The year is 2014. Do I—or this composite that attaches to my first-person singular—belong to my historical age? Certainly there is more nineteenth century than twenty-first century in my temperament; more celestial spheres than general relativity in my projected universe; more ancient Athens than

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World Wide Web in my cultural geography. Conversely, when I consider how mired Western civilization still is in the swamps of atavisms, how snail-slow we still are in our efforts to get beyond the follies of the past and realize the promise of modernity, then I feel that historically I am not yet born, that I am sixty minus a century or two. Yet for all this untimeliness, I cannot deny that I am also a child of my age, for I cannot fully belong to a world that does not include the likes of Radiohead.

To say that age is "relative" is to understate and even misstate the issue. Certainly one's lived experience of age is relative to one's race, class, gender, culture, nation, and education. In certain societies, a fifteen-year-old boy can hardly imagine what it means to be a fifteen-year-old girl in that same society, or what it means to be a boy of his age in a very different society. Beyond these special relativities, however, there is a more general relativity, whereby being fifteen years old means something altogether different at the dawn of the third millennium than it did at the dawn of the second or first millennium, to say nothing of prehistory. Yet be it special or general, relativity in its basic concept can only take us so far when it comes to the complex manifold that constitutes a person's true age. I mean the manifold of body, mind, and soul, each of which has an enfolded dynamic of its own. The concept of relativity does as much to obscure as to clarify the bewildering nexus that keeps this manifold mysteriously united in a single person, even as it remains in a state of constant flux, unfolding its unity in what we call—vaguely enough—time.

The human nexus in question remains bound to a first-person singular, and that first-person singular remains bound to a given historical era (history funnels itself through the first-person singular, one could say). Historical eras, in turn, unfold within a larger framework of what have traditionally been called cultural ages. The ancients, for example, spoke of a golden age, a silver age, a bronze age, and so forth. Giambattista Vico spoke of the age of gods, the age of heroes, and the age of men. Later in this book, with Vico's help, we will see that the phenomenon's ap-

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pearance is conditioned by a society's cultural age as much as it is conditioned by an individual's existential age; in other words, the changes that a society's cultural mentality undergoes in historical time play a formative role in how the phenomenon reveals itself to those who share in that mentality. All of which confirms my contention that what is true at one stage of life, or at one stage of history, is at best only partially true at another—in sum, that truth has its age, or better, its ages.

Anthropos

We like to think that the rational mind—its capacity for abstract thought, its ability to calculate and manipulate the forces of nature, its power to devise, design, and discover—is evolution's greatest achievement to date, yet consider the following: we have built computers able to defeat the most intelligent chess players in the world, but when it comes to building a machine that can challenge an animal's ability to move effortlessly through a room without bumping into objects in its path, we are woefully inadequate. Our ratiocinative powers are relatively easy to reproduce artificially, while our sensory motors, depth perception, reflexes, and bodily coordination present a near hopeless challenge to the science of robotics. Why?

The answer has to do once again with age. On the scale of evolutionary time, our intelligence is altogether neoteric—its reasoning capacities emerged only a few thousand years ago—while evolution has had billions of years to perfect the kinetic functioning of living organisms. From an evolutionary point of view, the rational mind is so young that, by analogy, we humans reason the way a neonate moves and behaves—awkwardly, gropingly, struggling to exert control and agency over its motions. That's one reason, among many others, that we should be wary of letting our cognitive powers reshape our world and take full charge of our future destiny.

In addition to being "young" from an evolutionary point of view, human intelligence has a congenital connection to youth.

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Human beings' exceptionally prolonged childhood has allowed us to develop our intelligence no less than our intelligence has allowed us to prolong our childhood. Nothing is more extravagant, in the "youthful" sense, than human intelligence. It is the source of our timidity as well as our temerity. It has enabled us both to avoid danger and to court it. It has fostered the blessings and barbarisms of civilization, and has made us the most terrified and, at the same time, the most terrifying species ever to roam the earth.

Life throws everything that lives into risk, peril, and uncertainty. The biotic hovers insecurely on the border of opportunity and extinction. While all life is vulnerable, human beings remain far more exposed in their mode of being than any other living species, for we dwell in the openness of possibility, including the possibility of annihilation, and have found a way to turn that openness into conscious knowledge. At some fundamental level, knowledge arises as a human response to the novelty and strangeness that our exposed condition reveals in the world around us, as well as the world *inside* of us. The world in its disquieting wonder is forever new and strange to *Homo sapiens*, the way it is for the human young.

In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche asks what people really want when they seek out knowledge. His answer:

> Nothing more than this: Something strange is to be reduced to something *familiar*. And we philosophers—have we really meant *more* than this when we have spoken of knowledge? What is familiar means what we are used to so that we no longer marvel at it, our everyday, some rule in which we are stuck, anything at all in which we feel at home. Look, isn't our need for knowledge precisely this need for the familiar, the will to uncover under everything strange, unusual, and questionable something that no longer disturbs us? Is it not the *instinct of fear* that bids us to know? And is the jubilation of those who attain knowledge not the jubilation over the restoration of a sense of security? (300–301)

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There is much to ponder in this psychological account of the will to know, yet we should approach with caution Nietzsche's claim that "the instinct of fear bids us to know," for if fear alone could motivate the will to know, all of living nature would seek after knowledge. It requires a distinct form of anxiety—a tear in the fabric of instinct, reflex, and routine—to jolt a species into conceptual mediation, sense-making, and language. In short, into consciousness. This tear must come from *within* the being of *Homo sapiens*, in such a way that its lacerations provoke a self-awareness that takes cognizance of the surrounding world in its enigma. The ancients suggested as much when they declared that human consciousness first sprang from wonder, which can take the form of marvel, puzzlement, or dread. In one form or the other, it arises as a response to the overwhelming strangeness of the world, above all the strangeness of our being in it.

There is no wonder without self-awareness, and where wonder prevails, the dictum "nothing new under the sun" does not apply. Human consciousness in its heightened self-awareness both engenders and reacts to novelty. The new startles. It unsettles. It awakens. It calls for attention, apprehension, and adaptation. Where there is life there is neophobia, for in the natural world the new usually entails disruption and danger. Yet here too human beings are exceptions, for alongside our natural, self-preserving neophobia, there coexists a counterstrain of neophilia. Humans dwell in the midst of the new like children who are at once attracted by and suspicious of novelty. Had our species not been endowed with this neophilic counterstrain from the start, it is unlikely that we would have wandered to the uttermost ends of the earth, invented tools, disclosed the realm of intelligibility, and let loose upon the natural world the altogether unearthly powers of human thought.

Such unearthly powers can arise only in a species that is at once exuberant and tormented. Humans have a self-consuming inclination to love what they dread, aggress what they love, and seek out what they shrink away from. The Renaissance humanist

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Francesco Bondini put it well in his 1574 treatise *Lezioni sopra il Comporre delle Novelle*:

> Much more amazing [than the wonders of the natural world] is the human intellect especially in its moments of perversity: love can lead us to destroy the object of love, as Deinara destroyed Hercules; in Oedipus we can see a trust in reason lead to its own overthrow; amazingly, it is as if in the human intellect there were a living force that destroyed the rationality of that intellect and the arguments that rationality might employ so as not to fall into such error. (Kirkpatrick, *English and Italian Literature*, 237)

Whether it resides in the human intellect or elsewhere, this "living force" is thoroughly odd, such that no amount of knowledge can domesticate its perversity. Thus any "jubilation over the restoration of a sense of security" that knowledge provides will invariably give way to new forms of dread, time and again, for the terror lies so not much in the world as in ourselves.

This is the essence of the anthropological affirmation that opens the famous first stasimon of Sophocles's play *Antigone*, otherwise known as the Ode on Man: "There is much that is strange, but nothing / that surpasses man in strangeness." The Greek word *deinos* can mean strange, marvelous, or terrifying. All three connotations come into play here. The chorus goes on to declare that man—*anthropos*—sails forth on mountainous waves in the dead of winter, subdues the earth with his plow, snares the "light-gliding birds," and draws fish up from the abyss of the sea; that he has yoked the stallion and the formidable bull; that "he has found his way / to the resonance of the word / and to wind-swift all-understanding"; that he has devised shelter, found cures for illness, and created law and justice. For all his resourcefulness, however, he often comes to ill through his rashness (*tolma*) and finds himself *apolis*, without city. Try as he may, he is powerless to escape what eventually claims whatever

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