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Toil and Trouble

On the Materiality of Time

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For Kane Race and Meaghan Morris, without whom...

—1. NOISE

There's an interesting essay by Roger Chartier, in which he shows that European universities, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, began to take in more students than the Church, with its monopoly on classical knowledge, could absorb.[1] There began to be a surplus of educated men for whom there were insufficient positions as priests, curates and schoolmasters; and thus the modern category of the intellectual began to emerge, which in turn made a major contribution to the Enlightenment movement, and with it to the social disturbances that finally brought about the end of the *ancien regime* and the emergence out of revolution of the modern world. Out of such small disorders in the best-regulated systems—that is to say, out of the vulnerability of social conventions to the entropy that inevitably and parasitically inhabits them—large social transformations can emerge, only to be subject in due course to more disorder, and to further changes.

The form of study we call 'history', then, is an after-the-event 'investigation' or 'story' (Greek: 'istoria'), of the changes in the material world of 'nature', on the one hand, and in the human or social world of 'culture', on the other—changes that we

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also call history. In this latter sense, of change in both the natural world and the social world of the human, history, then, is the name we give to the material, and hence perceptible, effects of time; those outcomes that make time available to the examination of the scholars we call historians. The pursuit we call 'history' both examines and records the materiality of time—that is, the changing character of the natural and social worlds as such changes arise from the toil of negentropy pitting itself, in the form of work, against the disordering 'trouble' that arises from the parasitic presence of entropy.

But also, and finally, the mode of our perceptions of temporal processes varies accordingly as these are perceived as 'events'—disturbing the supposed tranquility of ordinary life—or alternatively as 'everyday' life itself: the tranquility of apparent eventlessness that we nevertheless know to be subject to the eventual incursion of events that range in kind from the minor happenings of personal and interpersonal life to the social and the planetary. On the one hand there are wars, revolutions, parliamentary debates and elections (but also earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, thunderstorms and cyclones, for weather is also a material manifestation of time); and on the other births, deaths, marriages, affections, memorable dreams, intellectual breakthroughs, the first day of sunny weather after a period of rain, and the like. But what counts as everyday and what counts as history is in the end only a matter of scale and of relativity, since we know that, ultimately, the process of change arising from the constant interaction of entropy and negentropy is permanent, and that events—be they the small events of the everyday or the large events of sociopolitical history—arise only as a consequence of an unperceived build-up of micro-changes that is always going on, whether under cover of the perceived stability of everyday life (what a famous definition sums up as 'what is happening when nothing is happening') or in the form of social revolution and natural disaster.

That's why cultural studies, for example, can be described as a history—in the word's etymological sense of an investigation—but a history of everyday life, leaving the 'big' events that punctuate the everyday, but also emerge out of it, to the domain of history 'proper'. Such is the case even though we know very well that such a difference is anything but a distinction, since the existence of Chartier's and others'

practice of ‘cultural history’ demonstrates that history too has an interest in the everyday and the cultural.

In information theory, the name that is given to the parasitic presence of entropy (or ‘trouble’) in linguistic and other modes of communication is ‘noise’ (or sometimes ‘static’). In ordinary or everyday acts of communication, the presence of noise most often goes unperceived, although everyone knows from experience what the game of ‘telephone’ demonstrates, how easily miscommunication can arise in the affairs of daily life. Miscommunication is a function of distance and difference, the impossibility of simultaneity that makes time manifest. Such forms of communicational entropy are combatted by the form of negentropy that is called redundancy: if I want my message to be understood, I had better repeat it any number of times, or say it in any number of different but recognisably similar ways, as all teachers know; and language has many forms of built-in redundancy for that reason. But it’s also easy to see the many ways in which redundancy in turn can itself be self-defeating: the more I repeat a message, verbatim or otherwise, the less people are likely to attend to it; the more I vary my reiterations of the ‘same’ message, the more confusing it risks becoming (that is the lecturer’s dilemma—you’ll see me wrestling with it here and now).

Of course, the better I know the person or the audience I’m communicating with, the better my chance of pitching my message right, so that it will be ‘picked up’ by the other, alert to my tendency to speak ironically, for example, or aware of the ‘background’ story to what I’m saying. Nevertheless, the more two people know each other, the greater the chance, also, of there being a ‘history’ of their relationship, and the more likely, therefore, that that history will intervene to provide ready-made interpretations of what one of them may be saying—interpretations that may or may not correspond to the actual intentions, much less to the unconscious motivations one may have in speaking. In short, what we call habit is as much a factor of noise as is novelty or strangeness: it’s just that, in the case of habit, there is somewhat less chance of one’s being aware of it.

This, in interpersonal relations, is the same phenomenon of unawareness—the inability to perceive the trouble that is happening all the time—as is the everyday in history, another version of the deceptiveness of habit. For if, like the Bogan River of my childhood, the river of time is mainly a slow ooze, it can sometimes flood.

‘Double, double, toil and trouble,’ chant the witches in *Macbeth*. ‘Fire, burn and cauldron, bubble,’ it goes on … Time is a witches’ brew; in it something is always in the process of fermenting, and ‘toil and trouble’—the ordering productivity of work and the destructive power of dysfunction—are co-partners, enacting together, like burning fire and bubbling cauldron, the production and expenditure of energy that we call life. A Shakespearean riddle, not surprisingly disguised as verbal noise, anticipates the second law of thermodynamics.

—2. OOZE

A number of years ago, Meaghan Morris published a remarkable pair of essays in which she drew attention to the value of poetry as one of the modes of cultural studies.[2] Her example was the poetry of John Forbes. That idea has contributed something essential to my own work on Baudelaire, whose poetry I began to understand not only as testifying to the ever-increasing noisiness of modern urban life, but also as itself exercising an art of poetic noise—a harbinger of the twentieth century art in which toil and trouble so frequently supplant more classical ideals of aesthesis, as personified for example by Baudelaire’s friend and contemporary Theophile Gautier, for whom poetry is a matter of beauty, harmony and light. Against the tempest of history, Gautier famously closes his metaphoric windowpane in order to write poems of classical perfection. Baudelaire’s poet throws open his attic window and lets in the babble and disorder of the street, figured notably (in one of his prose poems) by a passing glazier, with his rattling cart and strident street-cry.[3] I’m quoting a prose poem here, but the title of Baudelaire’s verse poetry collection is *The Flowers of Malevolence*. Set that title against Gautier’s ‘Enamelwork and Cameos’ and together the two tell us something, not only about the complexities of friendship, but also about an important turn in the history of French poetry and of modern literature.

But I digress. I mention Meaghan’s essay and its influence on my work because I want to make the same kind of claim for the relevance of literary prose to cultural studies as she made for John Forbes’ (rather essay-like) poems. In particular, I want to do some quick readings of a couple of novels and an autobiography with a view to suggesting what they can tell us about time and its manifestations, in the everyday

and as historical event, in the form of trouble—trouble quietly brewing and barely noticeable, and trouble unexpectedly breaking out, in the urgency of destructive events. As Frank Kermode pointed out some time ago, in a famous book entitled *The Sense of an Ending*, 'fictions are for finding things out'.[4] (That autobiography shares with fiction the sort of veracity Kermode has in mind is, I hope you will agree, entirely to its credit.)

Waterland is a novel by the English writer Graham Swift. It concerns the way what he calls the 'natural stuff', alias entropy, 'is always getting the better of the artificial stuff, alias negentropy. 'This unfathomable stuff that we're made from,' says its narrator:

> this stuff that we're always coming back to—our love of life, children, our love of life—is more anarchic, more subversive than any Tennis Court Oath ever was. That's why these revolutions always have a whiff of death about them. That's why there's always a Terror waiting around the corner.[5]

(You will have gathered that the speaker is a history teacher, and that he is teaching a class about the French Revolution.) Ooze and silt, in *Waterland*, are manifestations of this 'natural stuff' that materialises the everyday passing of time, while a river in full flood sweeping everything it can out to sea is both the site of the novel's most dramatic and destructive events, and its figure for entropy's damaging power at the height of its effect—the narrator's 'natural stuff' that tends always to build and accumulate until it is unleashed as a violent *event*.

So it is the brewing of beer, Waterland's key industry, that—like the witches brew in Macbeth—provides a central motif, or rather a figure, for the novel's preoccupation with toil and more especially trouble: the stirring of the cauldron, or its overflow, that unleashes so much damage. The motto of the local brewery is *Ex aqua fermentum*, and the narrator's family history, which provides the novel's plot, begins in incest and traverses adolescent sexuality, abortion, idiocy and murder, ending in the theft of a baby and the narrator/history-teacher's dismissal from his teaching post. Like the River Ouse flowing into the sea, everything comes out in the 'Wash' of history; and by the novel's end time's victory—that of entropy over negentropy—is as good as complete.[6] 'While others tell you, "This is the way, this is the path"' the teacher-narrator points out to his readership as to his class of

adolescents, 'the historian says: "And here are a few bungles, botches, blunders and fiascos." It doesn't work, it's human to err.'[7]

By now you may have guessed that the 'Waterland' of the novel's title refers to England's Fens country: the marshy region of swamps, streams and low-lying fields that stretches north of Cambridge on either side of the River Ouse, having been reclaimed over time from the wide bay of the Wash in a never-ending but always losing effort of negentropy carried out by means of canals, locks and sluice gates—an effort that resists, however imperfectly, the 'constant bid of the North Sea to reclaim its former territory'. It's a little bit of lowland Holland that finds itself on the wrong side of the water.

> Once the shallow, shifting waters of the Wash did not stop at Boston and King's Lynn but licked southwards as far as Cambridge, Huntingdon, Petersborough and Bedford. What caused them to retract? The answer can be given in a single syllable: silt. The Fens were formed by silt … a slow, insinuating agency. Silt which shapes and undermines continents, which demolishes as it builds, which is simultaneously accretions and erosion; neither process nor decay.[8]

The silty waterland of the Fens, then, materialises time in its everyday manifestations as—like the exchange of land and water that forms silt—future becomes past and past becomes future in the perpetual instability of an apparent, but shifting, present. A present that is constantly threatened, therefore, by an outbreak—or the breakthrough—of disorder in the form of destructive historical events, a flood for example. The witches cauldron boils over. Always latent, trouble becomes manifest. The slow build up of silt we call life can be washed away in a moment.

—3. Everyday trouble and historical trouble

A pair of concepts that were developed some time ago by Michel de Certeau, in his wonderful study of the social practices of the everyday, offers us a way to theorise the relation of 'everyday trouble', the daily ooze, to 'historical trouble' proper, the Wash in which everything comes out in the end. Everyday practices, Certeau writes:

> share with speech-acts the fact that they operate within the field of a given system (say language in the case of speech or traffic rules in the case of

> driving), in order to appropriate the system for personal purposes; thus is formed a present as a function of the kind of contract with the other that the poaching presupposes … Users put together, as best they can, innumerable infinitesimal transformations of, and within, the dominant cultural economy, with a view to adapting it to their own interests and rules.[9]

These improvised acts of poaching on the 'dominant cultural economy' or system of power, are 'tactical' in kind, says Certeau, as opposed to the 'strategies' of those who hold power. So the trouble they make—the entropy within the 'dominant cultural economy' that they bring about—tends to go unremarked, as forming part and parcel of the daily process—the silty ooze of entropy and negentropy—unless and until, by a kind of cumulative effect, they come to be perceived as overt resistance, and to call for a repressive response. In that way everyday oppositionality can produce an event, or a series of events, that is of the kind we call historical.

We can turn to the autobiography of Julian Assange for an exemplification of the way everyday oppositional poaching can gradually shade into an unignorable, because recognisably resistant and history-making, event. Assange is something of an iconic exemplar of that popular (if rare) Australian type variously known as the bastard from the bush, Ned Kelly, or maybe just the kid who 'mucks up' in class. He is the type of troublemaker whose oppositionality constantly shades into resistance and, in doing so, draws the ire of authority. Assange describes himself at sixteen, excited by the newly available invention of the personal computer and drawn by it into an experience of community with his fellow computer-geeks, an oppositional 'us' into which his individuality tends to merge, but which also, and for that very reason, is always on the brink of becoming an 'us-against-them'—a circumstance that eventually entails confrontation.

> In the future [he writes in his characteristic jargon], power would not come from the barrel of a gun but from communication, and people would know themselves, not by the imprimatur of a small and privileged coterie, but by the way they could disappear into a social network with large political potential.[10]

At a still young age, then, and well before the Wikileaks affair, he was already imagining the community that forms around the shared oppositionality, the quiet

trouble-making, that is called 'hacking'—but imagining it less as a mode of improvised self-defence in a world of constraints than as itself a potential wielder of strategic power—a group that engages in Certeau's practices of 'poaching' not so much oppositionally and as a tactic, but rather as always already a strategy of resistance—one that Assange thinks of as political.

The process begins innocently enough, then, as 'simply a great reaching out and a great exploration of the world'. For, he writes, 'that's how hacking begins. You want to get past a barrier that has been created to keep you out'.[11] It's a kind of oppositional battle of wits, then. But in time, he goes on, 'one saw that many of these barriers were sinister. They were set up to limit people's freedom, or to control the truth', so that hacking begins to seem like a 'creative endeavour … a way of getting over the high walls set up to protect power and making a difference'.[12] It is this desire to make a difference that shades before long into overt resistance, no longer a matter of tactics but of strategy.

Soon Assange's group—whose monikers (Mendax, Phoenix, Trax and Prime Suspect) betray something of the subversive motivation that now accompanies their oppositional pleasure—has come to the attention of the authorities, out to 'find a few test-cases to justify a new Computer Crimes Bill'.[13] After a first police raid on his mother's house, Mendax/Assange goes into hiding like a fugitive, moving into a squat in Fitzroy with his girlfriend (and in due course their young son), while the group of cyberpunks becomes increasingly aware, as he puts it, of the 'way computer technology can be a major tool in the fight for social justice'. A certain line has been crossed, a gauntlet thrown down. This overt resistance—no longer everyday poaching but a mode of participation in politics and the conscious making of history.

For by now the group is hacking into the Pentagon; and its members are under the surveillance of the Australian Federal Police. Wikileaks still lies in the future; but one night, when he has forgotten to conceal a disk containing secret Pentagon information, Assange is arrested and his group comes up for trial in Melbourne. They are fined and released on a good-behaviour bond. The original community itself has now broken up; some of its members having turned state's evidence. And what once was the merely oppositional and everyday 'fun' of hacking has become something that is conceived, on one side, as 'a major tool of social change' (in

Mendax's own jargon). and on the other as a form of theft that borders on treason as the betrayal of state secrets. Time's ooze—generated by, and as, the minor malfunctioning of the social order—has become overt conflict: the unignorable form of social noise, the ferment of struggle that is the object of 'history' *per se*.

But our concern is with the oppositionality, the minor trouble-making, that is the stuff, not so much of history 'proper', as of cultural studies and its first cousin, cultural history.

—4. Oppositionality and Cultural Discomfort

> 'I don't like tattoos!' Susan's hand struck the [steering-] wheel with each word. 'You can never get rid of them, and people change.'
>
> 'Exactly'
>
> 'They last forever, Marie.'
>
> 'Not as long as oil-paintings.'
>
> 'How can you compare them with art?' Susan scoffed.
>
> 'Just shut up about it will you!'
>
> Fiona McGregor, *Indelible Ink*[14]

Fiona McGregor's 2010 novel, *Indelible Ink*, includes a character named Clark, who is a middle-aged drop-out from the world of money and business, a loser in other words, separated from his wife and child and living on the scholarship awarded him to write a PhD in … cultural studies. His proposed thesis concerns the everyday life of early Sydney as it can be glimpsed in the engravings, and later the photographs, of the period; 'not regular history', as he phrases it, but '—the stuff that got brushed beneath the carpet'.[15] By the end of the novel, which is about the everyday life of present-day Sydney in the early twenty-first century, he still seems not to have started writing. So let's not dwell on what this tells us about cultural studies' reputation in the wider world as it is here represented; but we can note in passing that Clark's PhD also functions as an index—more technically (and in French) a *mise en abyme*—of the novel's own self-attributed genre, as itself a fictional version of a cultural studies essay: the 'history' (in the sense of an investigation) of a certain everyday, its toil and its trouble. Or, given the novel's insistence on the long-term destructive drought and the water restrictions from which the whole city is

suffering (along with large swathes of the rest of the country), we might say that its theme is the aridity of the cultural 'climate' of Sydney, in those early years of our still young, if not brand-new, century.

It's an investigation, then, an *istoria*—albeit in fictional form—of the everyday life of contemporary Sydney's materialist-oriented and money-obsessed Eastern half, where only the heroine's cleaning-lady, Fatima, travels in once a week from the distant west. As such, it's a history in something like the sense the word has in 'natural history': think Balzac and his careful investigation of social structures rather than, say, Dickens and his memorable delineation of character. But the novel is also a story of toil and trouble: its heroine battles less and less oppositionally and more and more lucidly and determinedly, against the double aridity of her environment, climatic and cultural—a revolt that in turn causes trouble and concern among her friends, family and acquaintances. For if, at bottom, her battle is a necessarily losing engagement against time itself in the form of entropy—her dying, drought-stricken garden, her own ageing body, a family and social life no longer nourishing—her oppositional maneouvering against time's noisy wearing-away of things entails an entropy of its own, 'toil and trouble' in the lives of those who care for her. The tattoos she gets, first at the Cross and then in Surry Hills, are emblematic of this double-bind, of causing social entropy by fighting against time.

The art of tattoo appeals to Marie precisely because of its indelibility, its symbolic resistance to the degradation that surrounds her and in which she is included. To her entourage of rich Mosman friends and her children, however, be they moneyed or not, her tattoos bring trouble and concern in another sense, as a sort of betrayal of class. For the story is mapped onto the topology of Sydney—leafy Mosman on the one hand, the raunchy Eastern suburbs on the other, the two simultaneously divided and joined—hyphenated—by the beautiful waters of the harbour. A life-time Mosmanite, Marie disconcertingly finds herself much more comfortable, now, with the easy-going, hard-to-surprise, 'cool' tattoo-people she meets in Bourke Street, and against whom she contrasts her own children. These, she thinks, 'had entered the No-fun Zone with adulthood,' and want to consign her, as she puts it, to 'the very back of that zone, with the retired professors and bingo-players'.[16] But her importation of Surry Hills laxity into the well-regulated

environment of Mosman is inevitably disconcerting to those who subscribe to a different set of social conventions and another view of life.

For the point of view, in the novel, is not always Marie's, although she is certainly its central character. McGregor's art—and this is one of the functions of the 'trouble' Marie's oppositionality causes to those around her—prevents these secondary figures from becoming mere caricatures, by making sure we get a sense of their own worries and concerns, and their own social alienations. Marie is aging unwillingly, on the one hand, but ungracefully, too, on the other. Ross, her husband, has divorced her for a younger woman; the three children and one granddaughter have moved away to make their own lives. Clark we've already met: he's the loser cultural studies student, and in the middle of a passionate but impossible love affair that keeps him from his work. Leon, the youngest, is gay and his mother's favourite; he has been trying to mount a gardening business in Brisbane but has come to Sydney to help out. Alas, he gets picked up by the police while cruising in the park and so is faced with an embarrassing court appearance. Blanche, the eldest, has been a star of the advertising world, but is pregnant and making the decision to give up her career and become a mother. To them all, their mother's behaviour is variously scandalous (the tattoos), worrisome (her alcoholism) and embarrassing (her mounting debts, her unwillingness to sell her beautiful old harbourside house and move into a flat, and in the end her state of health). Her friend Susan's attitude to her tattoos and their quarrel in the car I've already quoted. What from one point of view is courageous and touching in her struggle against time's depredations inevitably strikes Marie's family and friends as willful and bloody-minded.

Meanwhile Marie continues to drink heavily, ignores the pain that will prove to have been a sign of cancer, doesn't realise the extent to which gardening—notably under circumstances of drought—is beyond her, loves her children and is alienated by them, and enjoys her at first surreptitious friendship with Rhys the tattoo artist and the bohemian Bourke Street crowd into which she is gradually introduced. Rhys and Blanche, Marie's daughter—the dedicated tattooist working against time and the artist whose work in advertising is ephemeral and commercial—jointly point to a reflection in the novel on the powers and failure of art: on the one hand time resistant if socially troublesome; on the other socially complicit, but evanescent.

So in the end, of course, and as always, it's time that wins out. Marie's increasing social nonconformity and oppositionality, bordering on revolt, accompany her gradual descent into what the text calls 'her body's anarchy', as alcohol, disease and death gradually take their toll, and the cancer she has ignored proves to be incurable. But she remains plucky to the end, enjoying one last romantic fling during her final hospital stay (appropriately enough with a Maori), and 'winning' her battle against time in the very gesture that kills her, by deliberately taking an overdose of pain-killer. Life in time, in short—everyday history—is, like suicide, an attempt to win while losing out, struggling against entropy while succumbing to it, and in the process making toil and trouble for others.

If that's true of individual life, a similar pattern is observable in social existence. Even as one wins small victories in the name of individuality and personhood, one succumbs to the force of the predominant social discourse. Here's a small example. In the vet's waiting room, where she is about to hear the cruel word 'senility' applied to her beloved cat, Marie picks up a magazine. As she reads she checks her social status against that of her friend and alter ego, the socially conformist Susan (whom we know from the quarrel in the car). The article is about 'what's in and what's out' at the present moment; that is, the current patterns of social conformity. It's all nicely tabulated:

IN	OUT
Rock music	Dance music
Facial hair	Tattoos, body-piercing
Pilates, yoga	Gym, aerobics
Sunblock, fake tans	Real tans
Hipsters	Shoulder pads
Recycling	Fossil fuels

With relief she notes that she's 'out' in only one respect (the tattooing, of course), while her conformist friend is 'hopeless at recycling'.[17] In this respect, we're all like Marie and Susan: largely unaware of our own oppositional behaviours and of their

troublesome social impact, so important is it for us, as social animals, to be part of a community.

Pierre Bourdieu developed his famous concept of social 'habitus' by noting its absence in the displaced Berber societies of colonial Algeria—groups that had been moved from their traditional mountain-villages into camps; indeed, 'habitus' is probably best understood as an ideal concept, something experienced only in its absence, as already 'lost'.[18] Certainly it is a major strength of Fiona McGregor's novel that it so sharply observes the social awkwardness and embarrassment—the sadly lacking habitus—of Sydney culture as it is presently lived east of the Bridge. She's good at capturing the pretensions and hypocrisies, the peccadilloes and snobberies of the Middle Harbour crowd—where 'all the cars [are] shiny, all the houses big and all the shops … crowded with luxury goods'.[19] But her book's more profound and durable statement lies, I think, in its picture of the ageing, drought-damaged garden with its ailing angophora, 'smelling like death' in its efforts to survive and renew itself; and correspondingly in the trouble-ridden form of a social life—Marie's in particular—that is defined by its gaffes and its failures: 'nothing but a series of fumbling errors', as Marie herself puts it in one of her lucid moments, 'until you died'.[20] But it's also in the ambivalent pleasure she takes in making trouble of her own, scandalising her smart friends and her judgemental children (each of whom are themselves facing various forms of failure while claiming success) even as the cancer grows within her, her beloved cat barely clings to life, and she in turn eventually faces, and thumbs her nose at, her own dying and death. Like the Berber groups of 1950s' Algeria, this is a society lacking stability and, so to speak, without a soul—Gertrude Stein might complain, as she did of Oakland, that 'there's no there there'. And, following the direction of Clark's historical research, it would be important to try to trace the sources of this permanent and pervasive lack of habitus, this lack of groundedness and the consequent brittleness of relations, familial and social. (It's a good bet that they, too, as in the case of Bourdieu's Berbers, lie in colonialism generally, and in Sydney's own colonial history in particular.)

In any case, with the possible exception of Ross, the smooth operator who is the nearest the book comes to an actual villain, the most pervasive theme of the novel is certainly this general failure of habitus and its endless erosion of personal and

cultural stability, as a major indicator of the entropic work of temporality. *Savoir-faire* is what McGregor's characters most visibly lack; and it's also the lack, I think, that enables her fellow Sydneysiders (and indeed other Australians of the white-settler species) to recognise ourselves in so many of its characters. Take, for instance, the episode of David.

Susan does what friends are supposed to do and brings Marie and David together over a Mosman-style lunch party, at which Marie does what friends are *not* supposed to do and shocks her hostess and fellow guests, when the planned sale of her house comes up in conversation, by candidly acknowledging her poverty and unpaid debts, the forced sale of her house, and her growing intolerance of the Mosman way of life. Gaffe number one: one just doesn't say 'I hate Mosman' at a Mosman party. Nevertheless, albeit after a more than decent interval, David and Marie do get together for an, of course, elegant and expensive dinner at David's expense, after which they return to his apartment. 'Shall we move to the bedroom?' he asks, and things go well until:

> He moved down her body, then tensed.
>
> She couldn't see his face, just the shape of his head between her legs [...]
>
> His voice came out confused and wounded. 'Is it real?' [...]
>
> 'I wanted it. That's all.'
>
> The silence between them expanded;...[21]

When they finally do manage some sort of congress, Marie suspects he has resorted to Viagra. Another episode of social discomfort, then (which for present purposes I've had to truncate, alas).

Now enough time lapses for Marie to conclude that she will hear no more from David. But one day when she is watching the tennis on TV, he calls. This is episode number three in the saga of their relationship: the awkward lunch party, the awkward date, and now the long-delayed follow-up phone call. He has spent the intervening time boning up on the history of tattooing, and announces that he's a 'closet anthropologist'.

> 'Did you know that Joseph Banks had himself tattooed? Isn't that extraordinary?'
>
> Marie didn't know that, and felt a bit miffed that he had beaten her to the information.

Their conversation rapidly develops into a competition. David mentions a Japanese tattooist favoured by Edward VII 'before he became king', and adds:

> 'Apparently all the European aristocracy visited this man, in Yokohama.'
>
> 'Hori Chiyo,' Marie interjected. David was like a guest who offered to help at a dinner party and ended up taking over the whole menu. Yes, this was her territory; she elbowed him out of the way. 'I have a book here about all that.'
>
> [...]
>
> They began to talk over each other.[22]

By the time they meet again for dinner, at yet another expensive restaurant, David has talked himself into being sexually aroused by the very thought of Marie's tattoos, not to mention the glimpses he is now offered of her tattooed arms—for Marie is no longer satisfied with tattoo-work that no one—or rather hardly anyone—gets to see.

> David lowered his voice and said: 'So, all over your arms now? And where else did you say?'
>
> Marie cringed and kept her eyes on the menu.
>
> 'I saw a bloke once who'd had himself tattooed all over his face. They were all blurred. Ooh it was dreadful. He might as well have been black.'
>
> Marie rose. 'I won't have dessert thank you. I'm going to the bathroom.'[23]

Then, when David persists ('Oh I can't wait to get you home and get a better look at you'), she slaps him and walks out, 'the sound of David's laughter ringing in her ears'. So there it is. An exemplary case of 'lost habitus'—of social malfunction—on both sides.

People rub one another the wrong way, then; and our gardens end up smelling like death. Lost in the hospital where his mother lies dying, Clark feels drawn downward, as if into a grave, or a Dantean inferno. 'The hospital seems the perennial nightmare of this city of shifting sands, always being destroyed and rebuilt.'

> The dead rose up around him. The air-conditioning hummed in his ears, huge silver ducts snaking overhead. What did they keep down here? Maybe around the next corner he would find someone stirring a cauldron.[24]

Social friction, natural erosion, the expenditure of energy that keeps us cool: all forms of entropy. Time stirs the cauldron of death as the ducts hum and the witches chant: 'Double, double, toil and trouble.'

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More than sixty years ago—McGregor's 'No-fun' zone of retired professors and bingo-players is densely populated with ancient academics working on their memoirs—I was an eighteen-year-old, wet-behind-the-ears undergraduate at the New England University College (now the University of New England). One day, a fellow undergraduate, whose name—of course—I don't remember, emerged from a physics lecture looking like the proverbial stunned mullet. 'What's wrong?' we asked. He announced in awe that he had just learned that one day everything there is would have spent its energy and become inert. Such an outcome, we knew, was a long way off (and more recently the science of dark matter has begun to suspect the existence of a force that, counteracting entropy, keeps the universe expanding forever, a bit in the way that laziness makes work livable and helps perpetuate it). But back then, my friend's anxiety was readily communicated to us, which is why I still remember that moment of awe and fear, and am able to tell you of it today.

But if history came to a stop, I know what to ask, would time also end? Or would it continue, shorn of all material manifestation—the toil and trouble that is called life—and in a void of nothingness? Better the miserable life of history, perhaps, than such an endless eternity of absolute emptiness—time devoid of existence of any kind—and the fear such an endless absence strikes into the heart of anyone who tries to imagine it. Writing in another, theological, context a long time ago, Pascal struck the right note. 'The eternal silence of that infinite space over-awes me.'[25] Shorn of its materiality, pure time is as unimaginable, for us, as was for Pascal the infinite space of a universe without God.

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[24] Ibid., p. 401.
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