Stephen E. Huntley: Epistles

Edition One

Epistles:

Essays, Communiqués and Supplications

EDITION ONE

Stephen E. Huntley

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Aim and Purpose

Essays, Communiqués and Supplications on Various Topics.

About the Web Site

The web site at **stephen.huntley.link**[1] is an attempt to build a writing platform whose contents can be formatted for either web or print publishing from the same source, in hopes of being able to preserve its contents for the long term by producing hard copies. By itself there's nothing new about this aspiration, over the past fifteen years or so in particular a number of tools and workflows have been devised in pursuit of dual web/print publishing.

What I'm striving to produce more specifically is a matrix both for: day-to-day writing, revising, blogging, research, outlining, brainstorming and gathering feedback; and for compiling, editing and archiving a comprehensive compendium of the total creative output of my life.

That is, the web site is meant to be simultaneously a writing and publishing platform, and a project for producing and annotating a volume of "Complete Works" which stands ready at all times to be published in full and yet will be continually added to and improved. Thus I envision that my "Complete Works" will not be the product of a final retrospective stage of my life, but a goal always being approached asymptotically but never finally reached until I can write and work no more.

This vision is inspired by a desire to bridge pre-internet traditions of intellectual work into the current era in a format adapted to today's technology and expectations. And thus to recover a portion of something valuable which seems to me to have been lost.

I'm among the last generation whose memory, education and work experience will incorporate any of the practices, guidelines and wisdom of intellectual creation that arose and were routinely taught before the advent of personal computers and the popular embrace of the internet.

In times past, intellectual and creative writers created a great deal of work product: notebooks, drafts, correspondence, manuscripts, fair copies. This work product of course was and is of value to scholars; indeed creators of the past consciously collected, sorted and preserved their archives if they had any expectation of or aspiration to notability, knowing that their papers would be studied and curated. More importantly, it was valuable to the creators themselves as they worked: their papers provided a medium for review, contemplation, re-evaluation, insight, inspiration. Accumulated work product amounted to a sort of labyrinth of meditation in the medieval sense.

By way of illustration, the poet Percy Shelley, in his impecunious early years, was well-practiced in skipping out on debts and stiffing landlords for unpaid rent. When he later attained a more firm financial footing, he only ever repaid one bad debt: to a landlady in Wales who was holding a trunk of his notebooks and manuscripts hostage.

[1] https://stephen.huntley.link

This creative resource seems now largely to have been lost.[2] Who saves drafts when working with a word processor or text editor? Who among creative people has a plan to back up and preserve their work? Commercial web sites into which millions of people pour uncountable hours of creative effort disappear overnight and take everything with them. People now are deluged with email; who makes an effort to archive worthy conversations?

In place of the former ways, corporations that provide internet and social media services have constructed for us another sort of labyrinth, designed to work in the ancient Greek sense of a place to get permanently lost in. In order to make meaningful contact with others in our digital society we are expected to direct our creative efforts toward producing content for these services, and as we do our attention and concentration are run through their mazes and dissipated. Our movements through the labyrinth are recorded and quantified, and the statistical results are monetized for the corporations' benefit. In the meantime we are alienated from our own creative work, our selves and our posterity denied the opportunity to develop life-long relationships with it, and with such relationships are lost the spiritual opportunities for insight and self-knowledge.

The web site is designed and implemented with the goal of restoring some of what has been lost. A workspace to doodle with notes, diary entries and drafts, turn drafts into manuscripts and manuscripts into books, essays, monographs and collections. A resource for scholars should there ever be interest. Most importantly a retreat and reference for a lifetime of review and reflection. Every edit and revision is saved, and the full record of revisions is part of the work, in postmodern fashion. The current provisional state of each division of the site is publishable in hard copy form, however rough it may be. The "Complete Works" is a destination always aspired to but never quite reached, but at the same time always present and accessible now.

As a member of the technical world that prefers to have distinct, searchable and indexible names for software concepts and tools, I've been using the abbreviation *EDIWTB* to label this toolset/workflow, which for those requiring a technically descriptive meaning I'll claim stands for "Edit/Distribution Integration from Web Template to Binding". But for the sake of my own literary inspiration I assign to it the mantra "Every Day I Write The Books".

An experiment in simultaneous research, authoring, and digital/print publishing.

EDIWTB is:

"Edit/Distribution Integration from Web Template to Books"

or

"Every Day I Write The Book"

That is, as a matter of producing a lifetime's creative output, instead of going through separate stages of doodling, inspiration, research, drafting, editing and then posting or printing of individual works or publishable volumes, I envision incorporating every day's work into a provisional final form that is

[2] "Local literary scholars lament the lost art of letter writing" https://web.archive.org/web/20230622165727/https://www.telegram.com/story/news/local/south-west/2014/03/15/local-literary-scholars-lament-lost/38148460007/

always ready for publication on the web and in print, and asymptotically approaches but never reaches the final definitive compendium of complete works that represents a life's effort.

Thus bridging pre-and post-internet traditions of creating and distributing creative and intellectual work.

Book Club:

In early 2023 I joined a book club, focused on the classics.[1] Below are my thoughts on some of the books read.

[1] https://web.archive.org/web/20220523031332/https://www.meetup.com/1001books/

Goodbye to Berlin

Christopher Isherwood

Book Club June 18, 2023

Goodbye to Berlin reads as a tenuously connected series of character sketches and anecdotes, collected by the author during his years in the city at the end of the Weimar era, teaching English to support himself as he tried to write. The novel famously set off the chain of inspirations (another set of tenuous links) that led eventually to the play and movie *Cabaret*.

Isherwood's tone generally ranges from bemused detachment to mild disdain, and sometimes to outright alienation, as the first page contains the well-known passage: "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking."

Christopher Isherwood

But as he is poised at his window, depicting himself as a passive observer, in the very next paragraph he relates how young men come down his street in the autumn evenings and boldly whistle up to their lovers in their own flats on the block. He is not passive in his observation of these rude, passionate, messy pursuits of the necessities of life; rather, his reaction is one of active repulsion: "Because of the whistling, I do not care to stay here in the evenings… I determine not to listen to it, pick up a book, try to read."

On the first page he thus reveals himself as a liar. He is actively on the run from life. Is he being ironic, or is he unaware of his duplicity, un-self-reflective? It is from the point of this self-revelation, knowing

or otherwise, that the work unfolds as a novel not a sketchbook, with a direction and a conclusion meaningful to Isherwood the narrator.

He describes his room as a microcosm of the dead Berlin of the past:

> The tall tiled stove, gorgeously coloured, like an altar. The washstand like a Gothic shrine. The cupboard is also Gothic, with carved cathedral windows: Bismarck faces the King of Prussia in stained glass. My best chair would do for a bishop's throne. In the corner three sham medieval halberds (from a theatrical touring company?) are fastened together to form a hatstand.

Isherwood the narrator is hiding in Berlin, among the shadows that the past still casts there. For him it is a labyrinth where he can avoid himself. The connecting thread of the novel is how the city progressively turns into a hall of mirrors, where he must at last catch glimpses of himself, but only through the prisms of other people – without seeming to realize it.

While nightcrawling with the wild English teen runaway Sally Bowles, he meets Clive, a rich American who is happy to pick up the bills as the three lose themselves in weeks of partying. Clive is typically American to English eyes, voluble and outgoing, always ready for a good time. "Yet, even as he appealed to us, I thought I could sometimes detect odd sly flashes of sarcasm. What did he really think of us?"

Isherwood seems oblivious to the notion that, in his condescending and supercilious manner with others, always masked by his charming English politeness and diffidence, he might come across to others in the same way. When Clive suddenly disappears from town, there is a glimmer of reflection: "I imagined him leaving every new town and every new set of acquaintances in much the same sort of way. I sympathized with him, a good deal."

He encounters a shuffling senior drug addict in a dive bar: "The old man had a nervous tic and kept shaking his head all the time, as if saying to Life: No. No. No." By this time it is not hard for the reader to fill in for oneself just who it is saying No.

Isherwood decides to spend the following summer on a working-class resort island, as always claiming that the move is to facilitate his writing. He shares a cabin with another Englishman, Peter, who is close to him in age, and with a German teenager named Otto. In this sketch, the narrator soon seems strangely to disappear almost entirely from the narrative, and the focus falls on Peter as he seems forlornly to pursue a relationship with Otto, without any hint given as to the goal of his pursuit (beyond the priapic association of his name).

Peter, in his lugubrious, hang-dog pursuit seems uncannily to be a golemic projection of Isherwood himself, evidently lacking self-consciousness or capacity for introspection; he seems to want to play house with Otto, but the teen is too energetic and volatile for that. Peter's desire not only dares not speak its name, but he cowers even from conceiving what he wants.

And so Isherwood's aloofness progresses via metaphor to a crippled inability to cultivate an inner life, a deficiency that comes to threaten his life spiritually and physically as the Nazi party begins its final ascent to power.

In Berlin he makes friends with Bernhard, a cultured department store manager from a wealthy family. Bernhard's life has all the trappings of success and happiness, but he is dissatisfied in ways he will not express, and is evidently paralyzed when it comes to making changes. Like Isherwood he hides behind a mask, one of culture and taste. Bernhard seems to be courting Isherwood in enigmatic fashion, but like Peter is unwilling or unable to put a name to his desire.

Finally Isherwood lashes out:

> I often wonder why you have anything to do with me at all. I feel sometimes that you actually dislike me, and that you say and do things to show it… what I can't stand is that you show your resentment by adopting this mock-humble attitude…. Actually, you're the least humble person I've ever met.

Again, Isherwood shows no self-consciousness that this is how he likely comes off to others. Their relationship ends with Bernhard saying:

> all this seems to me a little unreal, a little – please don't be offended, Christopher – trivial, I know that I am getting out of touch with existence… Do you know, there are times when I sit here alone in the evenings, amongst these books and stone figures, and there comes to me such a strange sensation of unreality, as if this were my whole life? Yes, actually, sometimes, I have felt a doubt as to whether our firm – that great building packed from floor to roof with all our accumulation of property – really exists at all, except in my imagination… And then I have had an unpleasant feeling, such as one has in a dream, that I myself do not exist.

And with this self-incrimination Bernhard indicts himself, Christopher and Berlin all at once. Unwillingness to face oneself, denial of one's inner life, leads to loss of empathy, loss of touch with reality, and paralysis; and through this spiritual void the Nazis are able to march to power.

In his soulless wanderings through the labyrinth of the city, Christopher encounters not only the rich and dissipated but also the poor, sick and debased. His encounters begin at last to awaken in him the sense that others are real, and with that comes the beginnings of empathy and a balanced sense of what life is.

He at last takes on Herr N. as a pupil, a middle-class government employee who is planning to emigrate to the United States:

> Herr N. talks to me chiefly about his family. He is worried about his son, who is very delicate… His wife is delicate, too. He hopes the journey won't tire her. He describes her symptoms, and the kind of medicine she is taking… In a tactful, impersonal way we have become quite intimate… Behind everything he says I am aware of an immense sadness.

Herr N. is grappling with the necessities of life no less than the profane whistlers under Christopher's window. Love, care and sadness, taken together over the years, compose a life. And rather than feeling repulsion from life's messiness, for the first time in the novel Christopher describes himself as feeling actual intimacy with someone.

And now at last Christopher is able to sense the reality of the Nazi threat, as something more than a joke being played on the citizens of Berlin who unlike him don't have the option to leave. He is shocked to overhear a conversation between a young Nazi and his girlfriend in a cafe:

> "Oh, I know we shall win, all right," he exclaims impatiently, "but that's not enough!" He thumps the table with his fist: "Blood must flow!"

The stakes to him now are real. Like Herr N. he at last finds the will to break his paralysis and leave Berlin in pursuit of an authentic life. On the eve of leaving, he visits a cabaret with his friend Fritz. As they leave they encounter a party of rowdy young Americans:

> "Say," he asked Fritz, "what's on here?"
> "Men dressed as women," Fritz grinned.
> The little American simply couldn't believe it… "Do you mean they're *queer*?"
> "Eventually we're all queer," drawled Fritz solemnly, in lugubrious tones…
> "You *queer*, too, hey?" demanded the little American, turning suddenly on me.
> "Yes," I said, "very queer indeed."

On the first page of the novel Isherwood describes himself as a camera, a mechanism, recording only the surface features of life without evident capacity for introspection. On the last page he is able to imagine photographic reality in its proper proportion, as something distinct from him and his personal identity and feelings, which are as real to him now as what the camera shows:

> I catch sight of my face in the mirror of a shop, and am shocked[1] to see that I am smiling… The trams are going up and down the Kleiststrasse, just as usual. They, and the people on the pavement, and the teacosy dome of the Nollendorfplatz station have an air of curious familiarity, of striking resemblance to something one remembers as normal and pleasant in the past – like a very good photograph.

[1] I made a strange and somewhat disturbing discovery when checking this quote at an online source. Instead of "shocked", the word "horrified" is used in all editions of the novel I could find but one: The New Directions Publishing edition of 1963, a reprint of which I have owned for many years. This edition is "my" *Goodbye to Berlin*, and now I find it is in its own way unique, a mutant, a *lusus naturae*. The Internet Archive let me check editions from 1954 to the present, and all the others contain the latter word. It's disturbing because in a tale of rising fascism it seems Orwellian to change a text, to amend its history silently, even if it be to no evident purpose. Also disturbing because substituting this single word changes the tenor of the ending, and thus of the entire novel. One can be positively or negatively "shocked," thus the word here suggests that Isherwood may be pleasantly surprised by the changes that have been wrought in him. But "horrified" only goes one way. The word suggests a much darker and more confused psyche in the narrator as the text ends. I can't fathom why such a change would have been made. Regrettably I don't have the energy or eyesight to check exhaustively in what other ways this edition may differ from the others.

Memento Mori

Muriel Spark

Book Club July 9, 2023

The Scottish novelist Muriel Spark converted to Catholicism as an adult and credited her new religion with enabling her to become a successful writer. But in *Memento Mori,* she shows no evidence of interest in such things as grace or redemption for her characters. The novel's main characters are senior citizens, most of them dealing with their last days of physical and mental soundness; yet Spark seems to write gleefully of them as ninnies and neurotics – wasting their time running about trying to get the most of the time they have left when they could be doing the decent thing and simply disappearing from public life into the variety of care homes and hospices waiting for them.

The only character she shows evident sympathy for is the wickedest of them, the bully and crook in her early senior phase who does her best to corral and exploit the other elders in her grasp. Spark here reminds me of what Blake said of John Milton, the intensely religious author of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*: "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God and at liberty when of Devils & Hell is because he was… of the Devil's party without knowing it."[1]

Muriel Spark

The main characters are being harassed by an anonymous serial phone caller, who simply says "Remember you must die" to his targets. That and the title suggest that the theme of the novel is that life

[1] *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* by William Blake

needs to be put into perspective by keeping awareness of death's inevitability close. There are also suggestions that there is honor in memorializing the dead: Alec Warner and Jean Taylor, former lovers, muse about the ephemerality of existence:

> "Do you think, Jean, that other people exist?… you see that here is a respectable question. Given that you believe in your own existence as self-evident, do you believe in that of others? Tell me, Jean, do you believe that I for instance, at this moment, exist?"
> "…One does sometimes wonder, perhaps only half-consciously, if other people are real."
> "Please," he said, "wonder more than half-consciously about this question. Wonder about it with as much consciousness as you have, and tell me what is your answer."
> "Oh," she said, "I think in that case, other people do exist. That's my answer. It's only common sense… This graveyard is a kind of evidence," she said, "that other people exist."
> "…They are, I quite see, they are," he said, "an indication of the existence of others, for there are the names and times carved in stone. Not a proof, but at least a large testimony."
> "…But the graves are at least reassuring," she said, "for why bother to bury people if they don't exist?"

Their conversation suggests a literary project of anchoring the existence of us the living, in this modern age, via acknowledgement of the dead and those near death; the novel thus becoming something of an embodiment of the title, a first draft of a eulogy. But later the narrative turns to suggest that acknowledging death means the undoing of life and certainty, rather than the culmination and crowning of them. Later, after Jean has retired to a nursing home, she says to Alec:

> We all appear to ourselves frustrated in our old age, Alec, because we cling to everything so much. But in reality we are still [in retirement] fulfilling our lives.

But in her case as in most of the others, the fulfillment seems to come from giving up, from letting go of one's life's goals and giving in to the uncertainties of meaning and existence, embodied in the uncertainty about the nature of the phone stalker. Sparks' sympathies go to the characters who retire and disappear, and directs mockery to those who continue to try living a full life.

The exception, and the turn of narrative purpose, comes in depiction of the antics of Mrs. Pettigrew, the live-in caretaker who browbeats her elderly charges into docility for her own convenience, engages in power struggles against other servants who might challenge her will, and snoops her way into blackmail opportunities. Her verve, energy and clarity of purpose distinguish her from the other characters, and she is the only one fruitfully in command of her life's direction.

The unveiling of Sparks' true attitude and agenda in her delight with Mrs. Pettigrew suggests another commentary on Milton: "was Milton trying to tell us that being bad was more fun than being good?"[2]

[2]Professor Jennings, *Animal House*

Ephemera:

What news

What news, what news in this our tott’ring state?

System

“I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man’s.”

– William Blake, Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion