

The Little That We Get For Free

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“I never looked at it like that. It was part of what was normal, what was there,”¹ notes Colm Tóibín. Having commented on the recognition of a painted scene in a poem by Elizabeth Bishop and turned to a similar moment in his own life, he refers to the difference between a painter’s way of looking at a particular landscape and the manner in which someone who is not an artist, a child, looks at it. The canvas shows that, although the two visions, or views, or looks, seem to coincide, the painter sees the landscape differently because he has set himself free from normality, from the inconspicuousness of what is there. It is as if in order to present what is there, and perhaps suggest its invisible temporal and historical layers, even its erasure, the artist had had to annihilate the landscape first, the landscape entrapped in the blindness of a channeled and channeling vision. Normally, we relate to what we see by turning it into something that has always been there, and will always be there. As we memorise it, its inconspicuousness makes our memory indistinguishable from a kind of forgetting. Normality isolates inconspicuousness, if it does not engender it, the inconspicuousness that pertains to what is there, a landscape looked at repeatedly but never “like this” or “like that,” and the artist’s act of annihilation directs itself against this isolation, or production, of inconspicuousness, or against the ideology of normality. Annihilation allows the artist to depict a landscape that will undergo enormous changes with time. In the years and decades to

come, the painted landscape, “this literal small backwater” in Bishop’s poem and in the “sketch” it describes, the “sketch done in one hour, ‘in one breath,’” will cease to be the same, it will be dismantled. Erosion, as Tóibín says while looking at the Irish beach he remembers from childhood, changes the landscape, making it increasingly difficult to remember what was there, what was once normal and memorised, memorised to the point of being self-evident and hence forgotten, or no longer noticed. The artist preserves what is there, he preserves the literal, because he annihilates it. His intense gaze creates from memory, without looking, and hence from the verge of forgetting, where the compression may collapse into a depression, causing an irretrievable loss. In so doing, in hovering between compression and depression, he precedes the annihilation that awaits everything that is there. By placing the literal between two annihilations, so to speak, he enables whatever is there to come into existence, rendering it all the more palpable as, on the canvas, it must remain untouchable. What is there thus becomes a thought or an idea. The literal, or the letter, acquires a life of its own, an element in which it unfolds because nothing, no meaning, has been imposed upon it from the outside. Hannah Arendt puts it succinctly: “In order for us to think about somebody, he must be removed from our presence.”² So withdrawal, the creation of an annihilating distance that undermines the channels of normality, of what is there inconspicuously, proves to be the beginning of freedom, in the case of the artist and perhaps more generally, too. Yet is it also the beginning of privacy?

If privacy institutionalises withdrawal, if it encloses withdrawal and its freedom within a frame of normality, there is at least one form of withdrawal that cannot be understood in terms of privacy and that takes the one who exempts himself from normality beyond the separation of the public and the private. It is such a form of withdrawal that renders thinking possible in the first place. When I think, when I try to capture what is there outside of normality, I do not think private thoughts, just as I am not an individual dwelling in the privacy of a retreat, in an allegedly safe space. At best, then, privacy will be a compromise, an external shelter for a freedom of thought that has already crossed the boundaries between the private and the public by aiming at “the little that we get for free,” at the “earthly trust” mentioned in Bishop’s poem. For aiming at the “earthly trust” is, let us not forget, to aim at what is there, not at what one simply imagines or randomly

asserts to be there, not at what one could withhold and choose not to make public for reasons of self-interest alone, of private ambition, or drivenness.

A thought must be free to constitute itself as a thought, or as an insight that cannot simply be traced to its inception in other insights. Only when a thought is free can it be an insight, can it glimpse “the little that we get for free.” Traditionally, the concept that best encapsulates what the phrase “the little that we get for free” seems to designate is the concept of truth. But such truth is not an abstract truth, burdened by the awkwardness that empty generality confers upon it. Truth as “the little that we get for free” is a truth in flesh and blood, a truth that does not draw its strength from mere flesh, or from opinion, but that still amounts to an “earthly trust,” inseparable from the world thought discloses. Only when a thought is free can it get something “for free,” can it be true, can it remove itself from the world and return to it anew so as to disclose it, or one of its aspects, as if for the first time. Inasmuch, however, as such freedom of thought must be wrested again and again from the ideology of normality, inasmuch as withdrawal belongs to it as essentially as the courage that cuts through inhibitions and intimidations, there is no freedom that would not stand in a relationship to unfreedom, and no thought that would not stand in a relationship to stupidity, to the stupor or the insensibility triggered by the normality of what is there and that, being there, belongs to an established realm, to the private or the public. It is the stereotype, especially the stereotype of freedom associated with the realm of the private, that curtails free thoughts and arrests the hovering between compression and depression without which thought reproduces, stupidly and slavishly, what is there.

Privacy may enable the withdrawal in which the emancipation originates that clears the way for a free comportment on which thought depends, yet this emancipation must also be an emancipation from privacy and the relative protection it affords. We get nothing for free as long as we take the intractableness of withdrawal from normality for granted because the private is supposed to shield our thoughts from public inspection. The reason lies in that the freedom of thought stems itself from the release inherent in “the little we get for free,” not from the leeway privacy grants and perhaps guarantees. Conversely, the involvement that proves inseparable from thought’s withdrawal from normality, and no less

intractable, may have a transformative effect on the public sphere and may trigger all kinds of interventions, but cannot be contained within it. Only when measured against the standards that emerge after the private and the public have consolidated as distinct and often opposed social realms can withdrawal be considered a symptom of resignation and involvement a symptom of actionism. Nothing is for free, and hence nothing is free, in the realms of the public and the private. In both we must constantly negotiate what we get and what we don't get, and redrawing the dividing line that runs between these realms is part of the negotiation. The "little we get for free" is not negotiable, even though an effort must be made for us to open up, and remain open, to it.

Of course today we may deem ourselves lucky if we can still choose to travel in a quiet car when boarding a train, or stay out of sight of a drone's camera when moving about our flat, or engage in an exchange without being surveilled by the State, especially since anyone who is not an exhibitionist, or who prefers not to share everything immediately, and most prominently his own vulnerability, must be suspected of insurrection against the community into which he has been forced, and of subversiveness against society at large. Also, who will insist on privacy when his ability to be mobile and flexible, infinitely adaptable and exploitable, is required to make a living, or to survive under the threat of inflicted scarcity, ongoing violent conflicts, or a devastating civil war? "In the type of society that announces itself" the French linguist and philosopher Jean-Claude Milner writes, "the one ruled will be called upon so as to make himself accountable. He will not merely be obliged to obey, he will also have to give an account of how deep his docility reaches."³ Increasingly, then, evaluation, as an instrument of power, or as the manner in which power expresses itself, extends into a depth that tends to be referred to in terms of privacy. And the euphemism used to justify such an extension, used by both the ones who seek to legitimate the ruling powers and the ones who seek to resist them, is the word "transparency." Accountability, the evaluation of thought and the transparency imposed upon it, must be regarded as the contemporary form of servitude to normality that abolishes thought's freedom and truth. Where the value of everything is measured against how transparent everything is, transparency becomes the means to entrench a repressive normality in society that allows it to function as smoothly as possible, and to minimise

the “little that we get for free.” What is there is there, is safe and secured, by virtue of the evaluative account that renders it transparent, no matter how much it may not quite fit, or not fit at all, into the available grids. And, as Milner observes, the repressive aspect of such normality, the aspect of power, must also be detected in that the grids, submitted to a process of constant revision and amplification in the name of perfection, are designed not to permit anyone, or anything, to ever meet the expectations raised by the criteria of evaluation. Yet it is not privacy that Milner advocates when he discusses possible “active resistance”⁴ against the effects of evaluative ubiquity. Rather, he defends an individual “right to secrecy,” a right to “impenetrability” that he calls a “material” right because of the quality of resistance attributed to matter. Although it may seem tempting to claim that there is a close link between secrecy and privacy, secrecy actively resisting the invasion of public evaluation into every domain of life, secrecy is different from privacy in that, to assert itself, it does not entail the establishment of a distinct social realm, or of society’s acknowledgment of a division of its individual members into an exposed and a secluded part. For, ultimately, one cannot conceive of a more impenetrable and irreducible secrecy than the secrecy that consists in the very fact, or in the very act, of thinking, not because of the withdrawal thought operates but because of the impossibility of ever making the instant intelligible when thought touches upon truth, and gets something for free, comes into its own. Getting something for free is the very definition of secrecy, and where this happens, where a being is suddenly illuminated, as it were, or dwells in freedom, something of the nature of a thought or an insight has been communicated to it, to its flesh and blood, in whatever fashion. What remains peculiar, irresistible and ungraspable, forever withdrawn, about the secrecy inherent in getting something for free, what remains out of reach for the giver as much as for the taker, for a giver who, in a sense, gives nothing and for a taker who, in a sense, takes nothing, is that it is impossible to place such secrecy in opposition to a revelation, an outing, or publicity in general, since a true thought is a universal thought, a thought that can always be conceived of twice at the very least and from which, consequently, no one can ever be deprived. The more a thought attests to its universality, or the more it sheds light on the singular and thereby enlightens what has no resemblance, to

paraphrase Milner,⁵ the more secret and impenetrable it is, too. In short, the “right to secrecy” should be comprehended as a right to thinking, a right that does not precede thinking in a body of law but that is affirmed, audaciously, by every single thought. It is affirmed in the guise of the encouragement and the enthusiasm, the exhilarating and contaminating force of liberation from what is there, that, released by “the little that we get for free,” a thought carries with itself.

Hence we must identify a double impenetrability, or two aspects of a materialism of thought. We must distinguish between, on the one hand, an impenetrability at the heart of thought itself, a resistance that the mind encounters at the moment when its thoughts are freed, or when, free, it gets something for free, and, on the other hand, an impenetrability that withstands the sublimating elevation of flesh and blood, the detachment from a singular embeddedness within the world and its numbing normality. But what if the impenetrability of the mind and the impenetrability of the body were connected, what if “earthly trust” alone could get something “for free”, what if Adorno had intuited this connection when pleading for a transformative “migration” of metaphysics into a “micrology”?⁶ In any event, privacy seems too institutional a concern to be receptive to the anarchy of a secret consisting in a revelation, and it also seems too normalising a business to be receptive to the singularity of material abundance, to “our abundance / along with theirs: the munching cows / the iris, crisp and shivering, the water / still standing from spring freshets, / the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.”⁷

Summoning inspiration from *Les Créatures*, a rarely seen early film by Agnès Varda, from its idea that an artist should strive to find an adversary in order to achieve creativity, one should, today, denounce the opponents of thought and its speculative freedom by pointing at those who support an understanding of privacy as a therapeutic “safe space,” where one does not have to look at things “like this” or “like that,” and of the body and the mind as “vulnerable” and “precarious” and “fragile.”

Here is a quote from an article published recently in *The New York Times*. It refers to a “safe space” set up at Brown University for students, presumably undergraduates, to recover should they feel upset, disturbed, hurt, unstable, perhaps even traumatised by an unwanted, triggering exposure to critical views and dissenting arguments perceived as aggress-

ions against beliefs they hold dear, beliefs about themselves, others, or the world: “The room was equipped with cookies, colouring books, bubbles, Play-Doh, calming music, pillows, blankets and a video of frolicking puppies, as well as students and staff members trained to deal with trauma.”⁸ The author of this article, Julie Shulevitz, suggests that the price paid for the installation of such “safe spaces” and the instauration of a private environment that resembles the environment of a spoiled child, whose parents pursue an infantilisation of the infant, is an ever worsening confusion of two levels of speech, the level on which terms are used and the level on which they are mentioned. Indeed it may not always be easy to draw a line between these two levels. Yet the difficulty of keeping use and mention apart, and the inquiry into the reasons of this difficulty, must surely be one of the challenges that students, especially students in the humanities, should meet, and learn how to meet, while at university. Shulevitz also makes a sharp remark in relation to what could be considered a transformation of privacy. By becoming an allegedly “safe space”, privacy ceases to be an allegedly “free space.” And “once you designate some spaces as safe, you imply that the rest are unsafe.” Shulevitz adds: “It follows that they should be made safer.” But does it? Does not whoever draws such a conclusion, follow the very logic of safety to which a contemporary understanding of privacy yields?

The university is under attack from two sides. On the one hand, it is under attack from neoliberal administrators and their henchmen. On the other hand, it is under attack from students, academics, administrators, and intellectuals, who wish to ensure that the university prevails as a “safe space,” a space where thinking is no longer free but truncated by the assumption that some thoughts are dangerous and need to be banned because they can be harmful and haunt vulnerable subjects. Neoliberalism and militant exclusion of ideas are strictly complementary. In each case, it is the freedom of thought that is eliminated. In each case, the reorganisation of the university as a “safe space” amounts to an elimination of individuals who think for themselves, not privately but in a space neither private nor public. The struggle against the dismantlement of the university is the struggle against a new form of fascism.

In another recent and much discussed article on the shifting grounds

on which Higher Education stands in the United States, and more specifically on the puritan and repressive normalisation of sexuality on campuses across the country, on the curtailing of what used to be relegated to the private sphere, Laura Kipnis, a professor at Northwestern, points out that melodrama reigns supreme amongst students, academics, and administrators: “The melodramatic imagination’s obsession with helpless victims and powerful predators is what’s shaping the conversation of the moment, to the detriment of those whose interests are supposedly being protected, namely students. The result? Students’ sense of vulnerability is skyrocketing.”⁹ Kipnis reminds her readers of “a distressing little fact about the discomfort of vulnerability, which is that it’s pretty much a daily experience in the world, and every sentient being has to learn how to somehow negotiate the consequences and fallout, or go through life flummoxed at every turn.” If, in the past, privacy, or the ideology of privacy, sheltered freedom, it has become, in the present, a haven for servitude, for all who are enslaved to a rigid sense of themselves, others, and the world. In antiquity, Arendt recalls in *The Human Condition*, it was precisely the slave who had no “private place of his own,”¹⁰ and the new, contemporary sense of privacy as a space where one’s innermost convictions are kept safe, denotes a reaffirmation of the private that deprives the individual of privacy and makes him into less than an individual. The private sphere is no longer a supplement that offers some relief from the public sphere, as it was in modern times, but rather an extension of the public sphere entirely controlled by it. However, when everything can be said to be under control, and visibly so, the public collapses yet again into the private, into the meaninglessness of secrecy forever sealed. Privacy, rather than encouraging the free development of thoughts, turns into a space where stereotypes, standardised opinions, normality at its most alienating and reifying, stifle freedom. Although privacy’s relationship to thought was always external, no matter how empowering it may have been for a withdrawal that outstripped both the public and the private, and no matter how much the strange and dark intimacy of the mind may have averted damage from thought in the most private of all public spaces, in the space of solitary confinement, its redefinition as a safe space for vulnerable creatures who relinquish their freedom to a stiffening of their selves crushes the annihilating power of ideas without which there is no art, for example. It is

as if, paradoxically, nothing were less contingent on an outside than vulnerability itself, or as if the moment vulnerability is claimed, bad faith must take hold of it. Vulnerable creatures have a strange habit of surviving, as Nietzsche knew well enough. Inevitably, and ironically, vulnerability raises the question of who is more vulnerable, the one who clings reactively, or resentfully, to a menaced identity or the one who refuses to do so. Should it not be possible to ever give a satisfying answer to this question, one would need to speak of a vulnerability of vulnerability, of a vulnerability that would expose vulnerability and leave it unprotected, of a vulnerability that would render vulnerability all the more elusive, all the more intangible and impenetrable, all the more unassailable. Can vulnerability not be the site of a fortress, the safest of all spaces? Nowadays, to ask whether one may have some privacy, please, means asking whether one may have some vulnerability, please. And it means renouncing “the little we get for free.”

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Notes

- 1 Colm Tóibín, *On Elizabeth Bishop* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 198.
- 2 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 78.
- 3 Jean-Claude Milner, *La politique des choses* (Paris: Verdier, 2011), 15.
- 4 Milner, *La politique des choses*, 23.
- 5 Jean-Claude Milner, *Clartés de tout* (Paris: Verdier 2011), 33.
- 6 Theodor W. Adorno, “Negative Dialektik,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 399.

- 7 Elizabeth Bishop, "Poem," in *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus 1997), 177.
- 8 Judith Shulevitz, "In College and Hiding From Scary Ideas," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2015.
- 9 Laura Kipnis, "Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 27, 2015.
- 10 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 64.