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Warning Signals

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Warning Signals · *H. L. Hix*

1

I distrust length in writing. It usually covers a lack of clarity or purpose. I trust ideas. I distrust proof.

2

I am interested in condensation as an ideal in the expression of ideas. Ideas do not come to one at the end of long chains of reasoning, but with the suddenness of violent impact. It is the impact which is capable of lasting and which exposition always dissipates.

3

That truth confronts one directly does not imply that all that confronts one directly is truth.

That truth confronts one does not imply that it need not be pursued.

4

Prose used to be, as has been said, a struggle with poetry to acquire (through assuming some of its traits) its privilege; in this century, prose having won the privilege, poetry has become a struggle with prose.

5

What if philosophy began over? What if it no longer felt the need to respond to the problems of 4th-century Athens and 17th-century France? What if it began to set its own limits and determine its own direction and method? Might it then look outside itself for the matter of its investigations? Might it then be conceivable once more that in a democracy one could be put to death over it? Might not its ambitions—and its pretensions—be less? Might it not ask instead of whether one survives intact into the next world how one can survive intact in this one?

6

What if poetry began over? Before the MFA. Before confessional poetry. Before *vers libre*. Before the sonnet. Before the epic. What would it

look like if a poet could struggle with words again instead of traditions? What would it be like to “begin over” in the sense of facing life and the world again and finding the words they make necessary?

7

Memorization as a test for greatness in poetry. Even if one has by heart many poems which he can call up at will, the great poems retain a will of their own. Great poems call themselves up.

8

If Yeats is right, if the choice is between the life and the work, I choose the work. The best to which a life can attain is to steal from the rich and give to the poor. A work, on the other hand, can add to the available wealth.

9

America has created a capitalism of the pocketbook and a socialism of the soul. I want to become a capitalist of the soul, greedy and ambitious and selfish with my time and thought and energy, believing that whatever my soul can come to possess will not deprive and impoverish the souls of others but accrue to them.

10

It is not the world for which we fear in the face of the atomic bomb, but only ourselves. No one thinks we will annihilate all life on earth. Nature's evolutionary forces will repopulate the earth soon enough with new species. Our fear is based on the recognition that our species is unnecessary, that when we are gone no one will notice, that even if we could be replaced no one would bother to do so.

11

If truth is an extinct totem animal, argument is the map that specifies the place it would be found if it still existed, and aphorism is the description of what the animal would look like if you could get there.

12

Argument requires pride, the belief that one is strong enough to win others. Aphorism requires vanity, the belief that one is beautiful enough to win others.

One argues on the assumption that anyone who tries to resist will fail. One presents an aphorism on the assumption that anyone who tries to resist has failed already.

13

Suicide is a successful revolution against the tyranny of despair. Happiness is a tyranny so complete that the reigning despair is not even threatened by revolt.

14

The historian and the scientist say the past is like the future. The prophet says the past is the future.

15

Pleasure originates in freedom, but freedom can never yield meaning. Meaning arises from necessity or obligation. For one's life or one's work to be meaningful, one must relieve herself of as much freedom as possible. One who is not given sufficient or relevant constraints must impose them on herself. This is why in the U.S. in the twentieth century, great writers seem so often to be mentally ill.

16

Among a desert people whose primary water source was large melons which once opened spoiled rapidly, to eat apart from the group would be taboo. So is all solitude a form of excess.

17

"The windows of the soul." True, they should be open to fresh air, but they should also be closed to thieves.

18

A poet should study philosophy, not because it is a resource, but because it is a prison in whose confinement alone one determines how to live in the mountains and the forest.

19

I want poetry with a cadence, not mere meter or rhythm. An inertia, a gathering of momentum like a boulder crashing down a hillside taking trees with it as it goes.

20

Tragedy carries more weight than comedy because it alone is complete. A sad ending is the only right ending because it is the only ending that is an ending. A comedy is only the first half of a tragedy, an abandonment, a refusal to continue.

21

The automobile as the representative object of American culture. The car wreck as the definitive event.

22

Even small presses and university presses want first to know "What is this book's market?" No longer are we satisfied merely to ignore the voice crying in the wilderness, now we are trying systematically to eliminate the possibility of its being heard.

23

Ideas for new histories of philosophy.

A pseudo-feminist, pseudo-Freudian history of western philosophy in which the major ideas are explicated as sublimated variations on the fundamental male expression of despair: "I don't understand women." In which what all those male philosophers have been trying to explain is not God and the world, but what is to them more mysterious, more powerful, more inexplicable, less tractable.

A history of modern philosophy describing major philosophers according to how they understood the relation between subjective and objective. Thus, after Plato formulates the basic riddle that all experience is subjective but all truth is objective (for which his solution is that we should try therefore to transcend experience), one might begin with this kind of skeletal outline:

Descartes: The subjective grounds the objective.

Hume: All experience is subjective. All truth is objective. Therefore truth is inaccessible.

Kant: All experience is subjective. All truth is objective. There *must* be some connection.

Kierkegaard: All experience is subjective. All truth is objective. Therefore knowledge is not the basis of the subject's relation to what is objective.

Nietzsche: All experience is subjective. All truth is objective. Therefore the subject must create his/her non-objective truth.

24

The thinker's task: to maintain the detachment that diminishes prejudice and permits one to change and develop, without surrendering the passion that gives ideas force.