

Humility

Robert DiNapoli

When humility has departed the culture and its sources recede

As a virtue, humility is widely and deeply underestimated. Few understand it, and still fewer practise the genuine article. I hasten—humbly, of course—to add that I count myself no exemplar on either score. But like Chaucer's Pardoner, who can preach a thumping sermon against avarice while indulging in that very vice with practised aplomb, I have contemplated embodiments of humility in many settings, both in literature and in the world, that embolden me to speak its praise while remaining, like all of us, a bit behind in its practice. Such a forthright confession of inadequacy is called a 'humility trope' in literary studies. I have come across few honest ones in my time as a reader.¹ But before you condemn as hypocrisy my humble confession that I lack humility, I would, again humbly, point out how such a judgement would unintentionally demonstrate that I *am* truly humble. Thus I unfold a new twist in the old liar's paradox of Epimenides. Have fun—I said it was tricky.

Like love, humility is a many-splendoured thing. Like love's, its complexities elude the casual associations we bring to the word. To most, humility appears a negative virtue, a capacity to restrain overbearing, self-regarding or proud behaviour toward others. In our democratic age it is a virtue both tempting and fatally easy to counterfeit in public: what politician would want to front up to her public looking and sounding like either a pompous know-it-all or a baronial plutocrat? Yet who can really believe the affable protestations of a politician prowling for votes that 'Gee, I'm not saying I'm cleverer than any of you folks,² but all I'm saying is [*your dumbed-down slogan here*]...?' In any event, the *via negativa* of defining humility as the absence of pride gives us only a silhouette of the genuine virtue's positive qualities.

Humility will not be served by lowering your sense of your own worth (another common misconcep-

tion). To do that is simply to cringe, and cringers, beneath their lowly display, are rarely humble—more often they harbour an inadequately sublimated envy at what they see as others' good luck, which should have been theirs, had the world been more just. To be truly humble is to remain alert to the fact that, unless you're a castaway, your life unrolls amidst a tangle of reciprocal relationships, all of which demand some degree or other of discernment that can determine both justly and generously what is due to or from each. It is not humility to see only that your existence will import nothing to many people; neither is it pride to see that, for some, your presence may matter very much indeed. Real humility discerns and maintains an equilibrium between the two. To do its job properly it must solicit the assistance of both love and patience. Love has the best eyes, patience the best temper and tempering faculty. Humility defers wisely to both.

It is one of our day's most disabling pathologies that its economic and organisational instincts militate against the cultivation of humility. For us as consumers, particularly in the age of the internet, life comes to resemble one big Skinner box,³ where we are bombarded with a host of stimuli. Advertising alone accounts for most of the barrage, from old-school billboards and hoardings to the last nano-second's website pop-up. Product placements in films. Commercial television ads that hog air-time like some unstoppable vaudevillian. And we can only speculate about the quantities and qualities of subliminal jiggery-pokery trained on our *medulla oblongata* by the doctors of spin and sell while we're not looking. All of these devices aim to reduce us to objects: they insinuate themselves behind our frontal cortexes in order to prompt behaviours that will profit their makers, with or without our consent. Dead or alive. It is demeaning to see yourself as a lab rat, but not, strictly speaking, humbling. For the tyre-iron these little demiurgic prompts use to prise us away from the exercise of our free will is a composite of desire and self-regard. Think of the hair-product ad that offers a floating-tressed actress fixing the lens with her confidence and huskily intoning 'because I'm worth it'. The unspoken interrogative corollary of this declaration ('are you?') will leave the looker-on feeling subtly *not* 'worth it' should she resist the pitch. It's a lose-lose proposition, for whether the ad exalts or depresses you, it fixes your attention on your *self*, on your atomised little ego, mostly without help or stay from friends, family or hard-won wisdom. You *do* want to be 'worth it', don't you? The combined appeal to self-regard and self-doubt is masterful. None of it makes sense, rationally considered, but reason is the last thing such advertising seeks to prompt. That iconic footwear imperative, 'Just do it', is unusually naked in its

1 When Chaucer tells you he couldn't possibly describe Troilus' woe or Emily's beauty or the sights and sounds of this tournament or that lordly gathering, rest assured that there will follow a virtuosic rendering of that very thing he's just been apologising for being too stupid to get his modest poetic talents around.

2 Listen out for how often American politicians resort to that warm, cuddly, inclusive and faux-humble word 'folks'. You'll lose count, if you don't fall asleep first.

3 Named after the founder of behavioural psychology (and thus the inadvertent tutelary genius of the internet age), B. F. Skinner, a 'Skinner box' is basically any enclosed and controlled environment in which the behavioural psychologist can deploy measured stimuli to provoke and condition responses in his or her subject. It is symptomatic of the behaviourist pathology that the discipline impatiently dismisses the personal dimension of all affect and desire as a quantifiable response to quantifiable stimuli. To say, in effect, 'I can't be asked' as a way of eliminating messy particulars that might upset your tidy modelling is, to say the least, a piss-poor humility trope.

appeal to reflex over reflection. Given its ubiquity, both as an ad and now as a cultural-studies 'meme', it must have worked a happy magic on the manufacturer's sales figures.

Proper humility, in telling contrast, is centred on almost everything other than the self, though, as I've already observed, it is not mere self-negation. It works the boundary between the self and the world the self confronts. It balances the within and the without. That balance is the ground zero of most advertising, which seeks always to disturb it, so that the self comes to see the world as either a cornucopia bursting with goodies it lacks or, conversely, as a vacuum sucking at the self's own defences. Advertising compels us, if we fall under its spell, to plunder and to gourmandise. If we feel its pull but resist, it leaves us feeling we must plug one leaky hole after another in the wine skin of our psyche. This dynamic between the ad and its audience lacks measure above all else. Across infancy, childhood and adolescence each of us builds up a working model of who he or she is, through numberless encounters with whatever we are not: with other individuals and with material realities that refuse to conform to our wishes. We bump into things with hard, unyielding surfaces and sharp edges. Situations shock and surprise us, and, if all goes well, we learn neither to cringe nor to rage in the face of reality's confronting otherness but rather, quite literally, to *play* with it: simply to mess with it and see what, in every sense of the phrase, we can make of it.

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The wise soul takes in its stride the bumps and shocks, the surprises and delights its path turns up. Admittedly, these range widely. A terminal medical diagnosis is a different order of shock from being made redundant, a bereavement from a relationship break-up, winning the lottery from finding an extra fiver in a coat pocket (your own, of course). When we can cope with the lot (and most of us do, in our chaotic ways), we learn sooner or later not to take ourselves too seriously, except in what our experiences, good or bad, can tell us about ourselves. This is the real humility—reining in our immediate, unreflective responses till we can tune them to a firmament of light and shade much broader than our own parochial concerns. We register our outward climate as its weathers inwardly inform us, and real humility is the cell membrane of our self-awareness that regulates the osmosis between inside and outside.

Following these initial reflections, I can offer a peculiarly pointed example of how contemporary culture in the developed world pitches itself against just about every-

thing I've been saying about humility, in the form of an ad I recently found looming over an entrance to Melbourne Central rail station:



I have to admit it stopped me dead in my tracks, a small stone in the flow of commuters around me as I fished in my coat pocket for my mobile phone to capture this image. This enormous overhead hoarding left me torn between my disgust and disbelief at its manipulative chicanery and my elation at the 'gimme' I was being handed by the university and its marketing cohorts, which comprises a tidy case-study in just about every pathology of contemporary education, commerce and psychology I've been pursuing across a number of essays over the last two years. More vulgarly, it simply takes the biscuit, and (to indulge in some serious metaphor mixing) who am I to look such a gift horse in the mouth, apart from pondering the difficult question of where the hell to begin in such a target-rich environment?

Perhaps with the ad's imagery, intended by its makers to arrest attention and demand interpretation (not all of it conscious), as specifically as a work of medieval religious art. The central figure runs at you out of a sharply receding background, almost relativistically compressed. This guy is *moving*. Clearly young and fit, he appears at first glance to be running not *from* any disaster but *rather towards* some good that has transfixed him. And what a good! Whatever he's looking at, his fiercely intent gaze *lasers up* and over your head, practically *compelling* you to turn and see what he sees. His look also shouts, 'Out of my way, losers!' It demands a flinch as you realise *you're about to be trodden under this guy's teleologically taut tootsies*. His posture is the *very antithesis* of my notion

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of how real humility defers final judgements to hold itself open to suggestion and intuition—what hope for either in this neoliberal athlete's head? Not a lot, and yet his image is in itself endlessly suggestive. His right hand is raised as if in a medieval saint's benediction, but his posture is that of a sprinter out to break some world record. He's pumping, not blessing. His other hand hovers over his left hip, like that of a gunslinger twitching to 'Draw, pardner'. He's a gun, who's just burst from the starting blocks of life, ready to take on all comers, clad in a slinky black suit and loosened tie that express a thrusting male vigour—more rock-god than washed-out Monday-morning commuter on the tram.

Okay, okay! We get the picture. But it ain't over yet, folks. Check out his melodramatically rendered background. He's running down the middle of a busy urban street,⁴ keeping pace with a car—the inevitable accessory of Western affluence and imposing will (like a Norman baron's horse, of course), which he'll be able to afford once he's spent the requisite number of years harnessed to the plough of Heap, Stash and Hoard Pty Ltd. Behind him the streetscape recedes, on his left the façade of a bank or some other corporate edifice, grey but lit from within by a beckoning yellow glow of promise. Sunshine on a rainy day, for those who possess the key or password. To his right recedes a row of residential tower blocks in the banal modernist style of Melbourne's most recent South Bank erections (ahem), their price tags no doubt as lofty as their penthouse suites, which here embody Mr Go-Getter's domestic aspirations. It's all there, the entire material matrix of the life he's racing into helter-skelter. The portrait of a medieval saint with his icons? Or a patron-flattering eighteenth-century portrait filled with all the stuff he can have but you can't? 'Fra Lippo Lippi' meets Joshua Reynolds. 'Get in, or get out of the way', as a recent television advertisement for an iconic (what else?) brand of Australian pickup truck intoned, in an ocker version of Darth Vader's sinister *basso*.

Now, to be fair, all advertising exaggerates. That's how it performs the job it's paid to do. The fact that this advertisement shouts a pretty tall visual tale is not in itself all that shocking. As an ad for some item of men's toiletries, for a clothing retailer maybe, or for a fitness centre, it would be just another piece of idle street furniture to which you scarcely attend in passing. In the cognitive dissonance of my first encounter, my eyes roved its lower edge in search of some athletic footwear manufacturer's blazon. No, what's really arresting here is how this tacky plundering of the ad-man's toolkit was commissioned by a university, which no doubt paid fat fees for its creation and placement.⁵ And for whatever boost it may have given its enrolments.

But what message is the institution trying to communicate here? Now the doctored image hand-fasts with the spin-doctored word to complete the casting of a spell that would turn Macbeth's weird sisters, if they weren't already chromatically challenged, just green with envy at its potency: 'Fast track a three year degree into just two at MIT!'⁶ '... Thane of Cawdor!' I'm tempted to add, with a nod to Macbeth's own bloody fast track to success and its lurid outcomes. When I began teaching in the English university system in 1992, I first encountered the three-year undergraduate degree that was its standard issue. Used to the North American four-year template, I had to adjust to the English model's accelerated pace, which did have a rationale of sorts. English A-level exams required upper-level high-school students to undertake deeper special-subject studies than their North American counterparts. English year-twelve students worked with their subjects in ways American students might not encounter till their sophomore years in college.

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All well and good, but it struck me even then that the three-year degree still involved some premature forcing of the whole process of learning, which involves so much more than simply the transfer of X amount of information in Y units of time. Real learning has to mature in your mind's wine cellar. Uncorked too soon, it will taste raw with both inexperience and an insidious impertinence. To be precocious is to be both forward (in every sense of that lovely old item of social criticism) and just a little bit more pleased about it than is good for you. Of course, accelerated degree schemes probably owe more to government and institutional financial necessities than to any higher considerations. 'Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!' But the advertising apprentices taken on by the wizards of education ministry and dean's office have sprinkled their fairy dust on such crude economic necessities to render them positively aspirational. Thus, like its visual imagery, this ad's touting of an athletic efficiency in allowing you to whiz through three years of study in two promises a quick payoff. But of what kind? And to what end? The ad implies, powerfully, that learning is a necessary evil, an obstacle to be got out of the way as quick as you can in order to get on with the *real* business (ahem) of your life. At best it's a dead weight on your alpha-male (sorry, girls) progress to the summit of achievement. Learning as a hindrance to living rather than one of its essential faculties. A bit like a learner's probationary driving license—a condition of being not quite done yet, like a cake you return to the oven because the knife blade came out gloopy with uncooked batter.

Well, boys and girls, the simple fact of the matter is that none of us is 'done' yet, nor ever will be in this life.⁷ Real humility expresses a just awareness of this side of all human nature—how it treads the carpet of time with a step forever provisional, tentative, testing, probing and questing after conclusions it simply cannot reach. For

4 Not quite Dante's 'In mezzo del cammin di nostra vita', but it's tempting.

5 While paying its sessional lecturers just enough to keep them in thin gruel, no doubt.

6 This is the merest nit-picking, but the dynamic writing group behind this copy forgot to hyphenate 'three year' and, maybe 'fast track' (though the latter's a close call—never you mind: correct punctuation needn't detain happening alpha males).

7 John Donne worked a few good-awful puns on his own name into poems about this.

us time is a corridor rather than a room: a passage from here to there, and to countless further theres that lie beyond, at least this side of the grave. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. And beyond? Aye, there's the rub. That's a bit of a sore point for us stranded moderns. We've lost most of prior humankind's instinctive sense for what lies beyond.⁸ Hamlet stands among the first moderns to note this,⁹ as he contemplates death as

The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns ...

Death's absolute and incommunicable otherness, as he goes on to observe, 'puzzles the will'. Like Hamlet's upmarket university education at Wittenburg,¹⁰ the default scepticisms of our modernity have closed down the metaphysical escape-hatch in the fabric of the cosmos that allowed nearly all the previous generations of humankind to imagine, if they wished to, that life comprises more than just competition for finite material resources (not to mention more than is dreamed of in your philosophy, Horatio). The crude, unreflective scepticism that informs most public discourse in the developed world enforces its paradigm on all we see. Except in the land of the free from which I hail, to make a loud public fuss about any beliefs you may harbour about an afterlife constitutes a clanging faux pas. It's just not decent to claim confident knowledge of what, by its very nature, can never be known. Faith scandalises reason, as any sentence of, say, Richard Dawkins' polemics on behalf of reason will shriek at you (though St Paul and Tertullian got there long before him—and a bit more cheerfully). Matter is all that, well, *matters*. Anything else is moonshine, delusive and suspect.

Regard the ad again: look at the mass of *stuff* that crowds it—street, car, bank, towers—all pressing in on the figure at its centre. Prolonged meditation can turn this image on its head: it becomes hard to tell whether that heap of material prosperity represents a dream he's chasing or some suffocating nightmare he's trying to escape. A proper gnostic interpretation would certainly plump for the latter. The loss of traditional metaphysics has left many of us uneasy at being mere isolated chips in the big blow of the cosmos. We sound an inchoate note of unease across many registers, in settings that range from the revival tent to the psychologist's consulting room to New Age and self-help blogs. It takes little reflection for most of us to perceive how claustrophobically the merely economic cycles of getting and spending hem us in and confine our sense of possibility. In that phrase, 'getting and spending', Wordsworth skewers one of our characteristic modern obsessions at the dawn of that most materialist of human centuries, the nineteenth. The world-weary ennui that groans 'is that all there is?' sounds a haggard echo of one of romanticism's great gifts to the less romantic ages that have succeeded it.

8 Literally, figuratively or just wishful-thinkingly doesn't matter much here. What does matter is our subjective sense of death as an absolute void or blank, beyond which we can neither perceive nor imagine any concrete reality.

9 Harold Bloom insists, with as much passion as reason, that we *are* Hamlet. That is, that Shakespeare's evocation of this chilling agnosis experienced by reason, when it confronts absolutes on which it can gain no purchase, actually informs and shapes our modern experience of its cold. Even for those of us who've neither read nor heard a word Shakespeare wrote.

10 A renaissance byword for showy intellectual speculation that often acted corrosively on the certainties of old-time religion. Did Hamlet do the accelerated two-year course? Just asking—the guy in the ad is wearing a black suit after all ...

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Whether you call it the soul's homesickness for God or the psyche's troubled negotiation of the processes of individuation and re-integration matters little here. Fully independent consciousness comes at a cost, to which we all respond at widely different levels of awareness and distress. The outward pressure of our own engagement with the world meets the incoming pressures both of its physical processes (gravity, weather, rocks, etc.) and of all those other individuals we encounter face to face, in different social contexts that exert all sorts of influence and control over how we respond to one another. Humility acts as a kind of dancing-master who enables us to choreograph our steps in response to the shifting congeries of outward and inward energies that meet at the frontier of our psychic skin. In, out, in, out, shake it all about—to express the same notion in a hokier (but uncannily relevant) idiom. At the top of our form we can balance like some light-toed Pierrot, cutting capers on the crest of a jetting fountain of water. We must respect and, ultimately, learn to pay no mind to the exigencies of our situations. But memory, both individual and cultural, can play us false here: some negotiation or other comes off particularly well and we wish to repeat it, like some opera fan compulsively calling 'bravo!' for encores of his favourite aria over and over again. As individuals we fix such satisfying turns as habits. Cultures do the same in the form of institutions and traditions. In such fixities, which resist change and negotiation, humility can no longer function except in its most reduced form, as simple submission. Just do it again, to paraphrase the famous slogan. Our negotiations with the world in this way lose their elasticity, their play, their give and take.

Here lies the nub (or at least one nubbin) of everything that's moved me to write as I have been doing for the past few years.

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Whether in education, in commercial fiction, in IT applications, or in any other theatre of modern life and culture where our thought and imagination move through particular climates of expectation, we have built whole houses out of institutional beams and girders, arranged to capture and hold a momentary impression of something that worked for us in the past. We expect those beams and girders to reproduce mechanically a process that once satisfied our desire as part of a living tissue of experience, whose integuments of chance, circumstance, will and delight simply do not answer to our conscious command. Instead of waiting humbly on what else might find us, we impatiently demand more of the same—thus injecting the living tissue of reality with a kind of psychic formaldehyde that preserves it by killing it. Hence the numbing paradox, encountered at almost every turn by those with eyes to see, of institutions that suffocate and murder¹¹ the very interests they were constituted to serve: in government, in education, in health care and in so many other quarters of modern endeavour.¹² We become slaves to grinding mechanism—Samson blind at the Philistines' mill, or the children of Israel forced to serve Pharaoh's efficiency initiatives.

In my own stretch of reality, I have beheld the process at uncomfortably close quarters: in the self-serving indifference to real learning that besets too many institutions of higher education (and in their governors' increasingly naked itch to maximise cash flows); in the sclerotic, banal and pretentious inanities of educationalist discourse at all levels; and in the murderous disdain exhibited by too many lit-crit fashionistas toward the humble, living play of delight that dances between audience and text when each is lighting up the other.

The ideal literary critic must practise a profound humility, uncontaminated by self-regard or condescension. To speak of what I know best, the strongest literary texts I have encountered in my career as both an ordinary reader and a scholar—works such as *Beowulf* or the poetry of Chaucer or Blake or Emily Dickinson—are bottomless wells of potential meaning. The bucket you send plummeting down and, in a single reading, wind back up brimming with cold clear water, will hardly have exhausted the well's depths, which, for all we know, may communicate secretly with an aquifer as vast as an ocean. It would be the height of presumption ever to declare that you have understood, analysed or fathomed such a strong text fully. Especially when your declaration implies as a necessary corollary that, clever thing that you are, you have picked a lock whose secret

had eluded all the dolts and dullards out there who didn't. Score it me one, world nil. The ideal critic's proper humility sends that bucket back to the well time and again to see what other possibilities its previous ventures have failed to bring to light. One day the bottom will fall out, as the proverb goes, but not before the alert critic has watered and cultivated a lifetime's variety of flowering *pensées*.¹³

This is the heart of my demurrals from the greater part of modern academic literary discourse, which too often succumbs to a number of pernicious influences, all of which run counter to the operation of genuine humility. First and foremost it must answer to the imperious mind-set of its administrative overlords: the manager will always insist that everything he manages answer to a ratio of quantity ('how much?' 'how soon?' etc.¹⁴) and that all outcomes show themselves fully before their pursuit has even begun. The manager abhors an open-ended proposal as violently as nature abhors a vacuum. Mama don't want no fertile ambiguities or ambivalences 'round here. Thus the literary researcher's only 'product', as far as the managers of their Communications, Cultural Studies or Media Departments¹⁵ care, is grant money, which can be grubbed only by pitching compliantly worded proposals at research funding bodies. The membership of such bodies will commonly comprise career bureaucrats and the odd academic who's been initiated into the fraternal mysteries of the temple of Holy Bureaucratylus. Together they will smile on only those proposals that tick the requisite aims-and-outcomes and key-criteria boxes and speak the canting jargon of the day, however inapt to the matter proposed. Regans and Gonerils only—no Cordelias need apply.

I began by observing how broad and complex are the scope and effects of genuine humility. In my discussion I've been able to trace only a few of these, but I reckon they suffice to serve my broader theme of how the managerial mind-set, which dominates so much of our world's doings—certainly in those sectors with which I am familiar—proceeds with a crass, overbearing and meddling impatience. Obsessed with achieving its projected outcomes, it is too often incapable of standing still before whatever process or activity it means to manage. It's just itching to get onto and on with *things*. Its officious impatience cannot brook delay, which is all it sees in any real care for the living texture of whatever it brings as grist to its mill. What begins with brisk, cheery phrases about efficiency, performance indicators and enhanced outcomes¹⁶ ends in a grinning corpse-waste peopled only by zombified simulacra of living souls. The process turns what ought to be a playground into a concentration camp, its perimeter bounded by razor wire and look-out posts whose searchlights and machine-gun barrels look *in* rather than out.

Do I exaggerate? No doubt. When in Rome ... For when humility has fled, measure flies after, and what humility and measure have left behind can only lurch from the banal to the monstrous. Genuine humility alone can give their due to bracing excellence and genuine, life-giving achievement. In her quiet smile shines all the triumph worth celebrating. In that light, all this world's displays, obsessions and vauntings¹⁷ show as so much tinsel, trash and neurosis. Humility is the true touchstone, which plants donkey's ears on braying falsehood and, beneath the thickest mud, finds the gleam of gold. **E**

11 Othello's zombie drone of 'It is the cause. It is the cause' as he enters Desdemona's bedchamber to smother her is another Shakespearean echo that haunts my reflections here.

12 One of my favourite modern gospel paraphrases observes, 'For God so loved the world that he **didn't** send a committee' (John 3.16). Shall we all contemplate a raucous 'amen', brothers and sisters?

13 The French word is cognate with the English florist's 'pansies'. Thus the mad Ophelia's 'There's pansies, that's for thoughts'.

14 Notice how 'how good?' constitutes a question of a wholly different order. The managing mind must always refer it back to questions of quantity for any sort of comprehensible answer: 'what's it good **for**?' wants spreadsheets and tables in reply.

15 Which long ago, in a university far, far away, went by the nobler and less fatuous and dysphonious name of **English** departments. Anybody remember? They want us to forget, you know.

16 How did we ever come to allow the linguistic anti-matter of those last two shibboleths come so to bully our sense of the worth of our labours and, indeed, of our very selves?

17 And committee-brokered grants and awards, for the nonce.