CONCLUSION

WE ARE ALL SCRIPTURIENT

Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs

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If anyone knew with what impatience and vexatiousness I pen down my Conceptions, they might be very well assured that I am not only free from, but incapable of the common disease of this Scripturient age

Henry More,
'An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness'

I.

The chronophage is a monster that eats time. Squatting, insectoid, on top of the Corpus Clock in Cambridge, it mechanically turns the wheel, and snaps its jaws to consume each second. On the hour, a chain drops into a small wooden coffin in the back of the clock.

An industry that monetizes 'time on device' is a chronophage of a different order, with the tick of the clock replaced by the click of keys or the tap of thumbs on screen. A social machine that organizes and measures our scarce attention, assigning a numerical value to every scroll, pause, keystroke and click. A near-death experience, measuring out its approach by the second.

It makes time itself a commodity, albeit a very unevenly distributed one. Every time we average life expectancies, we bracket the worlds of plunder and prey, the centuries of colonial and class history concentrated in the huge differences of life chances across the planet. What *is* universal is that time is scarce. There are only so many hours in a day, so many days in a year and so many years in a life. The fictional 'average' human being on the planet has seventy years, or approximately six hundred thousand hours. Four hundred thousand of those will be spent awake.

If a life is defined by what we attend to, then from this aerial view, screen time, watch time, and time on device are ways of quantifying the life consumed as raw material by the social industry and its sister industries in amusement, entertainment and news. The spread of smartphone ownership has expedited the colonization of more and more of life by these attention-seeking industries. They work themselves into the interstices of the bulks of time we spend at work, eating, going to the toilet, socializing or in transit, and gradually enlarge their share.

The time taken by the Twittering Machine expands every year, both individually and in aggregate. The average global internet user now spends 135 minutes per day on the social industry platforms.[1] If spread uniformly over a life, this would amount to fifty thousand hours. Statista conservatively estimates that between 2010 and 2020, social industry users will have trebled from approximately one billion to three billion. This is in the context of an even larger share of life spent interacting with screens, much of it in computerized workplaces. For example, Americans spend eleven hours every day interacting with screens: most of their waking reality is a simulacrum. Such figures, of course, merely gesture with a hefty pinch of salt towards a scale, a quantity of decisions taken.

Addiction occurs through choices, but somehow it also happens behind our backs. No one consciously sets out to devote themselves to the machine, to become its addict. Its veto power over all other possible attentions takes place, cumulatively, through every apparently free

choice made as a user. We drop into the dead zone, the 'ticker trance' of feed addiction, by increment. The way the chronophagic machine fights for our attention recalls what Eastern Christianity used to call the demon of *acedia*. This was a predecessor of the modern concept of melancholia, and it was used in monasteries (those ancient writing machines) to describe an affliction of the devoted. In the original Greek, 'akedia' meant 'lack of care'. In the Latinized Christian use propagated by Evagrius of Pontus, it described a lack of care about one's life; a listless, restless spiritual lethargy.[2] The condition left one yearning for distraction and continual novelty, exploiting one's petty hates and hungers. It dissolved one's capacity for attending, for living as if living mattered, into a series of itches demanding to be scratched. Ultimately, it was dehumanizing, corrosive of meaning: it was spiritual death.

This way of describing our predicament runs the risk, innate to Christian demonology, of paranoia. It is less 'they're all out to get me' than 'evil is something that happens to me, rather than something I am involved in'. As with conspiracy theory, it externalizes evil. After all, the platforms are not only *not* demons; they are ostentatious about it. 'Don't be Evil', as the Google slogan has it. They don't, by themselves, generate the acedia, the generalized depression and weariness that they monetize. No more than the pharmaceutical industry does. They offer us a solution, an addiction which magnifies and potentiates acedia. But, as with all addictions, we succumb to it with our choices and our rationalizations. We are, after all, only staying in touch, only seeing what's happening, only looking for the news, friends, entertainment: the mood-altering substance which is euphemized as 'variable rewards' is something that affects other people.

Given the time this addiction demands of us, we are entitled to ask what else we might be doing, what else we could be addicted to. A near-death experience often forces us to take a more executive view, to see our micro-decisions in the context of an absolute scarcity of life. It imposes a rigour which is counter to acedia. If we had, for example, just one year to live, and really intended to live, how much of that time would we spend doing what we now do on the Twittering Machine? If we are suddenly 'scripturient', if we feel compelled to write to one another, could we find a better platform for doing so? And if cyber-utopianism has collapsed, what would a utopia of writing really be like?

II.

It would be hard to overstate the scale of the change we're going through. Writing is fundamentally conservative. It is a conventional system of markings that, to be comprehensible, has to be preserved. As the historian of writing Barry Powell argues, this conservatism is supported by political power.[3] The use of writing stabilizes language, suppresses local variation, gives the impression of homogeneity. Even revolutionaries, as Mao discovered, struggle to transform writing systems.

That makes it, curiously, harder to see the cultural and political impact that each specific technology of writing has. Writing is a technology whose materiality – whether it is with papyrus and reed, pen and paper, movable type or computer – is never neutral as to its possible uses. But the more it stays the same, the less there is to contrast it with. Alphabetic writing has dominated in most parts of the world for 2,500 years. Printed writing has dominated for six hundred years. Partly because of their longevity, there has been no direct way to see their deep cultural effects in everyday life: to see how the material properties of our writing systems favour some kinds of expression and prejudice others. Making these visible has been the work of archaeologists and historians.

The digital revolution over recent decades has suddenly offered a freshet of contrasts. The ease of associative linking with hypertext underlines just how deeply embedded linear writing – and therefore linear thinking – has been in print culture.[4] The internet spontaneously achieves the kind of montaging and remediation of content that in the print era was the preserve of cultural margins: scrapbooking, for example, or modernist poetry. The availability of real-time written communication has revived the use of logographic and pictographic elements in writing, the emoticon for example, to efficiently convey aspects of spoken conversation such as register and expression. This abruptly highlights how contrived the dominance of exclusively alphabetic writing has been, and the degree of formality and protocol in expression that it has required of us.

The emerging economy of digital writing, with drastically reduced costs of reproduction, upends economies of scale by which writing has been organized into note, letter, article, essay, novel, encyclopedia. A couple of ordinary sentences can be of enormous economic value, as demonstrated by Snapchat's loss of $1.3 billion stock value after a single tweet by Kylie Jenner. It shows us how much our inherited standards of punctuation, rubrication and letterform are a legacy of the early modern reinvention of the book as, in Marshall McLuhan's words, the 'first uniformly repeatable commodity, the first assembly line, and the first mass-production'.[5] It also upsets centred hierarchies of writing, where all texts ultimately refer to and are legitimized by a single, sacred text such as a bible or constitution. On a distributed network of writing, there is no single centre.

Above all, the digital revolution blurs the social distinction between reader and writer. Part of the allure of the Twittering Machine has been the way it extends the privilege of writing. The history of literacy is also a history of repression and exclusion. Of fictional women, burning 'like beacons' in the literature of men, as Virginia Woolf put it in her essay 'A Room of One's Own', while real women were 'locked up, beaten and flung about the room'. Of slaves forbidden to write, secretly acquiring the means to send private letters, or learning to read only to burn incandescently at their captivity. 'The more I read,' Frederick Douglass wrote in 1845, 'the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers'.[6]

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist short story from 1892, 'The Yellow Wallpaper',

men are desperate to control writing. Writing, the protagonist is told, is her symptom. It rots her brain. All these morbid fantasies. It is not motherly. It is not wifely. It gives rise to her hysterical illness. In fact, as becomes clear in the story, writing is both her symptom and her only hope of a cure. It is the return of the repressed. 'The subject cries out,' Lacan exclaimed, 'from every pore of his being what he cannot talk about.'[7] Her writing sweats with an overplus of meaning. There's something the writer can't say; it pours out of her anyway.

Since the men in her life, terrified of her sexuality and its potential violence, can't hear her, Gilman's protagonist must write. She compulsively writes and writes, and suffers boredom, withdrawal and restless visions when prevented from writing. Writing and its absence exercise a despotic power over her life, no less than the patriarchs do.

We are, abruptly, writing more than we ever have before. Our 'scripturient' disease, the writing symptom, shows, in part, how much was waiting to be expressed before the digital upheaval incited a new revolution in mass literacy. Handwriting was once the privilege of a few, before the first explosion of mass literacy in the late nineteenth century. Where it was taught, penmanship was indexed to social class, gender and occupation: merchants, lawyers, women and upper-class men were taught distinct letterform styles.[8] The very appearance and configuration of the shapes and spacing of letters allowed a reader to quickly understand its social significance. Even in the printed word, there emerged an association of letterform with social class: think, today, of the different fonts deployed by 'popular' newspapers and those of the broadsheets. Writing has always been laden with hierarchies of significance and signification.

What distinguishes the new mass literacy from its nineteenth-century predecessor is the spread of writing, in the homogenized fonts of the computer, the smartphone, the Twittering Machine. The characteristic experience of literacy prior to the Internet was reading; now it is writing.[9] Amid a collapse in trust in the old media, whose commercial strategies and political affiliations have drawn it further and further away from the priorities of its audiences, the people formerly known as the audience have become the producers. We still read, but differently. We read less for edification than to be productive: scanning and scavenging material from a flow of messages and notifications. And as we do so we are, behind our backs as it were, writing in digital script. The practices of the computerized workplace overflow into those of the Twittering Machine.

Our dilemmas are therefore not those of the nineteenth century, when the spread of writing often had the inflection of social rebellion, as women, slaves and workers wrote against the wishes and purview of their masters and superiors. While there remain regimes, institutions and individuals who wish to shut us up, power more often works by making us speak, coaxing our confessions, our testimonies, our cries from the heart, out of us. Today Gilman's narrator, instead of encountering the assured authority of doctors and husbands, would be besieged by swarms of wishful online patriarchs, gendertrolls, far less assured but no

less terrified of what she might say. But she would also encounter the even more anonymous, semi-occulted means by which her writing is extracted: the Twittering Machine.

The old story in which the vital truth is repressed, and cries out to be told, isn't for the most part the story of the Twittering Machine. If we have nothing to write, or we don't know what to write, the machine will goad us. There will always be something to react to. The content agnosticism of the machine means that we can sometimes use it to break unjust silences, from #MeToo to Black Lives Matter. But the format in which even this writing takes place is coercive, harnessed to ceaseless production. In a way, the hyper-productivity of the machine might have the effect of producing a new kind of silence. The cathartic effect of writing, reacting to stimulus, can be a way of filling the void with endless monetizable chatter. A new form of stifling that leaves no space to say what matters. As Colette Soler put it, 'The gag has not been lifted: it has only changed its terms.'[10]

If we want 'free expression' today, it is no longer enough to demand the abolition of political constraints. We have to free expression from the ceaseless production of redundancy, and ourselves from the compulsion to labour. We have to withdraw our labour and reclaim the pleasures of writing as leisure time.

III.

Things could have been different. Before the cyber-utopianism of the California tech scene, there was the cyber-utopianism of Paris's Left Bank. Before the internet, French hipsters were experimenting with online anonymity, an experience they called 'fading'. Before the Twittering Machine, there was a public-sector platform, open to all, which was at the cutting edge of communications technology, the envy of Silicon Valley.

They called it Minitel. The Médium Interactif par Numérisation d'Information Téléphonique: France's internet *avant la lettre*. Except that Minitel was not exactly like the internet. The terminal was a small, sleek wood-brown box with a keyboard that flipped out to reveal a screen. It was a videotex service, a service that allowed users to access pages of text and images in a computer-like format. It used slightly different technological principles from the internet, resulting in a more limited system. For example, Arpanet used a distributed network, rather than a centralized information system. It implemented a form of packet-switching, wherein a message is broken into bits of data, distributed over optimal routes and reassembled at destination, and which is still used today in the foundational protocols of the internet.

These systems were chosen, in part, for their military virtue. An alluring myth of the internet's origins has it that it was essentially invented by Paul Baran, of the RAND Corporation, as a way for communications to survive nuclear war.[11] The Arpanet system was actually designed separately, without Baran's direct involvement. Nonetheless, it used remarkably similar ideas, and Baran was one of the major inventors of the distributed network

and the packet-switching method. The underlying idea for a 'distributed network' of writing, published in a 1964 article, was that in the event of a nuclear strike, the communications system would best survive if it wasn't centralized.[12] This necessitated plenty of redundancy in the network. As Sandy Baldwin puts it: 'you design a distributed network full of waste to guarantee that it can communicate beyond the apocalypse.'[13] Even if every last human life was obliterated, there would still be bots messaging one another, Microsoft's 'TayTweets' riffing on new languages with Facebook's 'Bob' and 'Alice'.

The French government paid close attention. It had just withdrawn from NATO a few years before Arpanet was launched in 1969, and it was trying to build a competitive economy. It was desperate to outdo Britain and Germany by modernizing the French economy first.[14] The Gaullist state was ploughing money into advanced technological research, to update its telecommunications system. In 1973, engineers at the Institut de Recherche en Informatique et en Automatique had developed a network to rival Arpanet: CYCLADES. It was based on similar practices of decentralized networking. And it deployed its own version of packet-switching, using the 'datagram' invented by Louis Pouzin, which had been a major influence on the Arpanet design. The first CYCLADES terminal with television and keyboard calling was made public in 1974. This combination of telephone and computer was the earliest echo of what would later be called, with official gusto, 'telematics'.

The public sector threw its weight behind the development of this system. Gérard Théry, the French director general of telecommunications, drew up plans to develop a 'telephone for all' system as the infrastructural basis for 'computing for all'.[15] In 1978, a government report anticipated the 'computerization of society' and called for state investment to expedite the future. CYCLADES was ultimately defeated, however, by the internal politics of the public sector. France's telecommunications department, Postes, télégraphes et téléphones (PTT), had been developing its own system, Transpac. Transpac used, instead of packet-switching, a circuit-switched network. Circuit-switching is a much older system initially designed in 1878 for handling phone calls, using dedicated point-to-point connections for the duration of the call. At the insistence of the PTT, CYCLADES was defunded and the Transpac system was the basis for the emerging videotex service, Minitel.

Minitel was pioneered in 1981, in a small experiment in Velizy, connecting 2,500 homes with an experimental range of services. Central to this, and the major incentive for households to adopt the device, was that it offered a computerized file of the telephone directory so that calls to anyone could be made quickly and easily. By 1983, the service was successful enough to be extended throughout the whole of France. And the terminal was free, distributed by local authorities. France Télécom astutely surmised that the public couldn't be expected to buy something without knowing in advance what services would be available. Users were billed, not by subscription fee, but on a play now, pay later basis. The number of terminals in use soared to 531,000 by 1984. By the mid-1990s, just as the internet was being launched, there were over

six and a half million terminals.

The advantage of Minitel was that it was an open platform, guaranteed by the public sector. Anyone could offer any service or promote any idea. All one had to do was register and pay a fee. Initial press hostility diminished as the newspapers saw an opportunity to sell their product in a new medium. The services available included online shopping, chatting, booking tickets, interactive gaming, checking bank accounts – even the rudiments of what we today call 'smart homes', such as remote control of thermostats and home appliances.

New online visual arts flourished. So did a certain cosmopolitan cyber-utopianism. 'I am dreaming', wrote artist Ben Vautier, 'of a Minitel with which we should send a message in French and it would be received in Bantu at Tombouctou and in Basque in Bayonne.'[16] On the Left and within social movements, the technology generated breathless radical enthusiasm. There was good reason for this, as social organizations proved able, from the start, to turn the technology to their advantage.

In late 1986, for example, social movement organizations created a new Minitel service: 36-15 Alter. This combined twenty-five associations representing psychiatric patients, anti-racist students, farmers and other heterogeneous groups. They all paid the fee together, and collectively managed the informational commons. Alongside the 'free radio' movement, it showed that the old one-way communications system was breaking down. The old mass media had wielded the power of hypnotic mass suggestion, with audiences reduced to passive recipients of mediated messages. Philosopher Félix Guattari, a participant in 36-15 Alter, looked forward to the vanishing of 'the element of suggestion', and the emergence of a 'post-media era'. The 'machines of information, communication, intelligence, art and culture' could be collectively and individually reappropriated.[17]

In the same year as the launch of 36-15 Alter, student protesters used the message system of Libération, a left-wing daily which supplied Minitel content, to organize mass protests against education minister Alain Devaquet's reforms to the university system. The government's plan was to impose more selection in universities and charge fees. Within days of the mass protests, during which the student protester Malik Oussekine was killed in police custody, the law was withdrawn and Devaquet resigned. In 1988, nurses used the network to coordinate their strike action against health cuts, staff shortages and low wages. During the strike, they forged a new union, La Coordination Nationale Infirmière, and used Minitel as, in the words of sociologist Danièle Kergoat, 'a tool for transforming social reality'.[18] On Minitel, they could collectively discuss their situation, share notebooks of grievances, maintain shared status updates. Guattari enthused that the nurses 'knew how to use Minitel for transversal communication' to cut across old lines of division. They were able 'to dialogue' between different practices in different fields. They could fuse 'individual points of view with the collective movement' and allow 'minority positions' to be taken into account.

Minitel was not, however, a leftist utopia. In fact, it was far more akin to the agora that

enthusiasts of the internet would later celebrate. Among other things, it was a state-maintained free market.[19] Because it was open, one could just as easily use it to sell sex as incite revolution. In fact, the burgeoning online sex industry became one of its major hives of activity. The telecom entrepreneur Xavier Niel made his fortune running cybersex services on Minitel.[20] This was, as a former Minitel sex worker described, an industry that demanded industrial work rates. He was compelled, for example, to work with four terminals, using four different (usually female) identities at the same time, 'processing' clients as quickly as possible. What wasn't commercialized was the infrastructure itself. There was no way to make money from taps and clicks, and therefore no technological incentive for addiction, celebrification, trolling and the regular moments of explosion around aggregated sentiment that characterize the Twittering Machine.

It was also limited by its narrowly national basis. There was a chance that French technique could have globalized.[21] For a brief moment, Minitel had the ear of the California tech scene, its cultural leaders, ravers, tech geeks and anyone else who might be interested. In the early 1990s, before the internet was launched, France Télécom approached the influential West Coast guru John Coate, who had popularized the online bulletin board system The WELL. Coate was successful in gaining the attention of the tech scene, whose vanguard was impressed by Minitel. A system was duly pioneered, called '101 Online'. The problem is that, rather than providing the sort of open platform, the 'electronic "meeting place"', that Minitel provided in France, it ended up being a version of the proprietary services already available for the wealthy few from CompuServe and AOL.

Minitel failed for other reasons, too. Its technical basis was not kept up to date, and it relied too much on a national telecommunications infrastructure using circuit-switching. Minitel was outmoded and unable to compete with the World Wide Web. Its antiquated video transmission services couldn't beat the power of hypertext. In addition, France Télécom stopped supplying terminals free of charge, so user growth began to fall for the first time. The European Commission, seeing the global potential of the internet, recommended that the EU adopt the Californian 'free market' model as the basis for its dissemination. France Télécom began to link the Minitel network to the global internet, but with personal computing these terminals were no longer necessary and too restrictive. The dissemination of computing technology and, soon, mobile phones outstripped Minitel's accomplishments.

Yet, despite all of its limitations, the continuing affection for Minitel meant that it didn't immediately disappear. Millions of users continued to work with this antiquated model of 'télématique', and the platform wasn't finally shut down until 2012.

IV.

S ilicon Valley mythology holds that Minitel failed because it was too dirigiste, too state-directed. As Julien Mailland points out, however, both Minitel and the internet were the products of different quantities of state investment, private capital and thriving cultures of amateur enthusiasts and experts improving the technology and proselytizing for it.[22]

Both Minitel and the internet show that there is no 'free market' without substantial public-sector intervention and backing. The internet's history also shows us that when we rely on the private sector and its hallowed bromide of 'innovation', quite often that will result in technical innovations that are designed for manipulation, surveillance and exploitation.

The tax-evading, offshore wealth-hoarding, data-monopolizing, privacy-invading silicon giants benefit from the internet's 'free market' mythology, but the brief flourishing of Minitel shows us that other ways, other worlds, other platforms, are possible. The question is, given that there's no way to reverse history, how can we actualize these possibilities? What sort of power do we have? As users, it turns out, very little. We are not voters on the platforms; we are not even customers. We are the unpaid producers of raw material. We could, if we were organized, withdraw our labour power, commit social media suicide: but then what other platforms do we have access to with anything like the same reach?

The fate of minimalist Facebook alternatives like Ello demonstrates the dilemma of users. Ello was launched in 2014, with almost half a million dollars of venture capital funding. Its unique sell was that it would not turn users into commodities: 'You Are Not a Product', it offered. The majority of users ruefully rejoined, 'Oh Yes We Are'. Over a million people signed up – hardly negligible, but it barely made a dent in the Facebook leviathan. Any competitor to Facebook would have to offer something special to counter the 'user effects' which favour monopoly, let alone its addictive propensities. And the truth is that Ello, because it is not addictive, has very little eye candy and is not based on creating a hive of users goaded into frenzied activity, is rather boring. It's hard to imagine, during a conversation or train ride, repeatedly pulling out one's smartphone and irritably navigating to the Ello app to check the notifications. And that, in a nutshell, is the problem.

There are democratic potentials in the internet. Even if it is in essence a commercialized system of surveillance and controls, there have always been ways of writing against the grain. Radical movements, from Bernie Sanders' campaign in the United States to the Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour Party, have used professional social media campaigns to outflank and subvert the old media monopolies. Even in the People's Republic of China, the spread of online communications technologies has created new enclaves outside of the state's and companies' control. While the regime harnesses computerization and big data to state surveillance and the disciplinary system of 'social credit', workers use popular social industry platforms such as QQ and Sina Weibo – Chinese equivalents of Facebook and Twitter – to organize walkouts, discuss strategies and collate demands.[23]

There may also be ways to fight the social industry, incrementally, for control of the social

media platforms. In the United Kingdom, the Labour opposition is experimenting with ideas of a public service platform run by the BBC, one of the few brands with perhaps more global clout than Facebook. To some extent user-governed, and stripped of the data-hoarding, privacy-invading propensities of the existing social industry platforms, this has been proposed as part of a wider agenda of democratizing mass media. A successful public-sector competitor to Facebook and Google would be a significant problem for these giants, and for the advertisers that rely on them, given that the UK provides 40 million of Facebook's most affluent active users. However, whatever advantages it could have, it may also face the same problem as existing commercial competitors: a collective, culturally reinforced addiction, and the self-reinforcing tunnel of attention and satisfactions that it has generated.

And this is where the story is not just about corporations and technologies. The Twittering Machine may be a horror story, but it is one that involves all of us as users. We are part of the machine, and we find our satisfactions in it, however destructive they may be. And this horror story is only possible in a society that is busily producing horrors. We are only up for addiction to mood-altering devices because our emotions seem to need managing, if not bludgeoning by relentless stimulus. We are only happy to drop into the dead-zone trance because of whatever is disappointing in the world of the living. Twitter toxicity is only endurable because it seems less worse than the alternatives. 'No addiction', as Francis Spufford has written, 'is ever explained by examining the drug. The drug didn't cause the need. A tour of a brewery won't explain why somebody became an alcoholic.'[24]

To break an addiction, the neuroscientist Marc Lewis has argued, is a unique act of reinvention.[25] It requires a creative leap. The addict gives up meth not by going cold turkey or taking a pharmaceutical substitute, but by breaking the compulsory force of habit. It is not a matter of a single 'crossroads' decision, like a vote or a purchase in which everything immediately resolves into clarity. It is a process of becoming different. For the individual addict, that might mean undergoing intensive psychotherapy, learning a new art or skill, or religious conversion. The beauty of neuroplasticity, says Lewis, is that while brain tissue is lost during addiction, as the attention tunnel prunes and shears unused synapses, once the addiction is over, the lost matter is not only replaced but actually increases. Recovering addicts don't simply get back what they have lost: they tend to develop entirely new and more sophisticated capacities. New ways of being in the world.

The question is what, collectively, would such a reinvention look like? How could we acquire new and better habits, better ways of writing to one another? If we've written our way into this situation, how can we write our way out of it?

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V.

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What could a utopia of writing look like? There is, and could be, no answer to that. If anyone knew what utopia looked like, it would have ceased to be utopia: we would be living in it.

Utopia is, literally, a non-place, meaning that utopias at their best are not prescriptions but imaginative placeholders for human desires. At its worst, cyber-utopianism has been a neo-liberal sublimation of 1960s communalism, reflecting the journey from the hippy Stewart Brand and the *Whole Earth Catalog* to *Wired* magazine. The whole earth, according to this dispensation, is a 'global, massively interconnected system of technology vibrating around us', as executive editor of *Wired*, Kevin Kelly, put it.[26] This conception, which he calls 'the technium', saw Kelly, Brand and their confederates serenaded by venture capital and lauded at Davos. But for Kelly, it had a more mystical significance. The technium was 'actually a divine phenomenon that is a reflection of God', he told *Christianity Today* in doxological tones.[27] More circumspect in his book, he ventured that 'if there is a God, the arc of the technium is aimed right at him'. This literally assigned a holy significance to the global triumph of Silicon Valley.

At its best, however, cyber-utopianism has revelled in untold possibility. From Manuel Castells' celebration of online 'creative autonomy' to Clay Shirky's egalitarian 'communities of practice', cyber-utopianism has welcomed, not so much a desired end state as the expansion of new horizons.[28] The openness and indeterminacy of the network seemingly permitted what John Stuart Mill would have called 'experiments of living'.[29] This is the utopian side of liberalism. The virtue of a platform model, from this point of view, is that it would enable everyone to write as uniquely as they must and as weirdly as they will.

The destruction of an ill-founded cyber-utopianism, insufficiently attentive to the political economy of platform capitalism and its pathologies, has given rise to a counter-utopian backlash. It manifests in the proliferation of articles with headlines like, 'I quit social media and it changed my life'. TED talks such as Cal Newport's 'Why you should quit social media'. Books like Jaron Lanier's *Ten Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*. Alongside these are the innumerable head-shaking think pieces about how to combat 'fake news' and stop Russian trolls from destroying democracy. Increasingly, the rich absent themselves, professionalizing and delegating their social media accounts. Platform bosses, of course, never get high on their own supply: social media abstinence is not an affliction of the poor, but the cultural distinction of the affluent.

'A world without utopias', as the historian Enzo Traverso writes, 'inevitably looks back'.[30] Without them, our thwarted longings sour and turn reactionary. And the backlash style, despite having the advantage that it disputes the inevitability of our assimilation into the Borg, is reactionary. It is compromised by a subtending fantasy that it could somehow be sufficient to exhort others to quit. Which is further underpinned by a fantasy that the frequent flights into mob irrationality, paranoia, nihilism and sadism characteristic of the social industry could be

solved simply by 'going back'. As though these phenomena had no deeper and farther-reaching roots.

This is the sort of position that is incorrectly derided as neo-Luddite. By now it is well known that the Luddites have been historically misrepresented, their struggle against exploitation and destitution having been unjustly caricatured as technophobia. They were not against machines, but skilled in their use. Their utopia, such as it was, was not a pre-industrial Arcadia, but an incipiently socialist one in which the machines were dominated by workers, rather than workers being dominated by the machine. They smashed the tools to disrupt an emerging social machine that treated them as expendable units of a production process.

The Luddites were also excellent trolls. They were, like the movement that was massacred at Peterloo a few years later, a prototypical class insurrection: but they carried it off with tremendous elan. The very name 'Luddite' deliberately evoked a fictitious leader, Ned Ludd, a product of legend and fantasy, fear of whom had British authorities and spies searching high and low for sign of him. His supporters decided that Mr Ludd lived in Sherwood Forest, home of the equally legendary Robin Hood, and signed their letters, 'Ned Ludd's Office, Sherwood Forest'. They cross-dressed and marched as 'General Ludd's wives'.[31]

Luddism in the twenty-first century is an entirely defensible position; indeed, a desirable one. But what would it look like? It could hardly begin by smashing the machine. It is far too distributed, globally. And at any rate, many of the things we call tools are abstractions: we can't 'smash' the like button. And our immediate problem with the Twittering Machine is not that it drives us into unemployment, but that it works us without remuneration the better to sell us as a product. It gives us tasks in the form of a casino-style game: it is in the vanguard of the gamification of capitalism. And if all that happened was that, in a giant digital suicide, we killed off the social industry, the media, amusement and entertainment complexes would fuse with venture capital to do it all again only more efficiently. We need more than this. We need an escapology, certainly, a theory of how to get out before it's too late. We also need to free up our time and energy and shape them to better purpose. We need something to long for, the better to devise grander escapologies. We need the 'intercalary gush' of Catholic poet Charles Péguy, a moment of rupture in our daily habits through which to escape not only the Twittering Machine but the unnecessary burden of misery that it successfully monetizes.[32]

Cyberspace is dreamspace, a place for exploration and reverie. Reverie is a dream, and a dream is a wish fulfilment; a momentary pleasure wherein a desire is partially satisfied. This is something to be cautiously optimistic about. If desire, as opposed to need or an instinctual programme, is distinctly human, then so is the ability to satisfy it indirectly, through fantasy. Indeed, since most desires can't be satisfied in any other way, reverie seems to be essential to a pleasurable life. The theft of the capacity for reverie by the social industry, the way it has used gaming-industry techniques to lead us into a guided trance, down pathways lit up with virtual rewards, is therefore no trivial matter. We might ask whether there are other technologies for

reverie in modern life, what the neo-Luddite approach might be to that.

We feel a compulsion to participate, to react, to keep up to speed, to be in the know. There is something to be said for refusing to be in the know. Robert Frost's poem from 1916, 'Choose Something Like a Star', speaks of an entity that both shows itself and hides itself. It appears in remote, dark obscurity and will only say 'I burn'. Even as it reveals itself to us, Frost suggests, something of its being remains mysterious, elusive. It asks of us, not understanding, but 'a certain height'. He says, when 'the mob is swayed to carry praise or blame too far', then, 'we may choose something like a star' to stay our minds. And with that, we can escape – from the hot flows of information, the flux, the bombardment, of impressions, of exposure to messages, more now than ever before, a data apocalypse, from which nothing intelligible can ultimately be wrested – to a fixed point of unknowing.

What would happen if we applied Delany's strategy of 'stupidity': that is, of only taking in as much information as we could put out? What if we were not in the know? What if our reveries were not productive? What if, in deliberate abdication of our smartphones, we strolled in the park with nothing but a notepad and a nice pen? What if we sat in a church and closed our eyes? What if we lay back on a lily pad, with nothing to do? Would someone call the police?