Preface

This book is a collection of thoughts, ideas, questions, and speculations on a variety of subjects none of which I am expert in. It also includes fragments of prose and poetry remembered from dreams. The handful of readers who have seen earlier versions of this book have had three main criticisms. The first is that I have not done sufficient reading on the various subjects considered. This is true: if you have ideas and questions about many subjects, and you are working in a vacuum, you soon must make a choice between, on the one hand, attempting to do competent research on one or two of these ideas, entirely on your own, without other people to talk to who have extensive knowledge of the subjects concerned, or, on the other hand, simply presenting all the ideas as briefly and clearly as you can in a book like this, leaving it to others to decide if any of the ideas are worth pursuing. I have chosen to do the latter.

Then, too, there are intellectuals, and I am one, who find that thinking about various questions *without* knowing everything, or even very much, of what others have already written about these questions, is an irresistible challenge. We are not happy in an age in which every intellectual is expected to know his place — to occupy his chosen speciality, and deferentially avoid venturing into other specialities. We think such behavior is unhealthy; we believe there are better and worse ways to think about questions for which we lack adequate knowledge, and that it is worthwhile attempting to exercise our ability at finding the better ways.

Furthermore, we believe that one's reading impulses are no more to be ignored than one's intellectual or artistic impulses; that systematic, exhaustive reading on a subject is by no means the only way to arrive at interesting ideas about that subject; we recall Eric Hoffer's reply when someone asked him how he conducted his research: he said that he followed his nose and found that sooner or later what he needed came to hand. This was his only method.

For me the heart and soul of the intellectual life is not scholarly research but conversation, discussion, debate, argument (in this book sometimes called "informal communication"). When I hear or read about an interesting idea, or when one occurs to me, my first impulse is to discuss it with people whose minds I respect and whose company I enjoy. It is just these discussions — the possibility of such discussions — which for me constitute the red-blooded core of the life of the mind.

> The most fruitful and natural exercise of the mind, in my opinion, is discussion. I find it sweeter than any other action of our life, and that is the reason why, if I were right now forced to choose, I believe I would rather consent to lose my sight than my hearing or speech. The Athenians, and the Romans too, preserved this practice in great honor in their academies...
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> The study of books is a languishing and feeble activity that gives no heat, whereas discussion teaches and exercises us at the same time. If I discuss with a strong jouster, he presses on my flanks, prods me right and left; his ideas launch mine. Rivalry, glory, competition, push me and lift me above myself. And unison is an altogether boring quality in discussion...
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> I love to argue and discuss, but in a small group and for my own sake. For to serve as a spectacle to the great and make a competitive parade of one's wit and chatter is an occupation that I find very unbecoming to a man of honor. — Montaigne, "Of the art of discussion"

The discussion may reveal that the idea has long since been worked over, or that it contains a fundamental error, or that it does not interest any of the other participants, or that it leads to other questions and thoughts that none of the participants has previously come across, or that more

information — possibly scholarly research — is needed before the discussion can continue. (It is a sign of these academic-ridden times that I feel compelled here to make a case for such discussions.)

On the other hand, there are counterarguments to the practice of merely presenting ideas that one has not developed through extensive research, for example:

> ...I might have made my own exposition popular, had my object been merely to sketch out a plan and leave its completion to others...Making plans is often the occupation of an opulent and boastful mind, which thus obtains the reputation of a creative genius, by demanding what it cannot itself supply; by censuring, what it cannot improve; and by proposing, what it knows not where to find. — Kant, Immanuel, *Prolegomena To Any Future Metaphysics*, Introduction, The Open Court Publishing Company, La Salle, Ill., 1955, p. 10.

and

> Like all writers, he measured the achievements of others by what they had accomplished, asking of them that they measure him by what he envisaged or planned. — Borges, Jorge Luis, "The Secret Miracle", in *Labyrinths*, New Directions, N.Y., 1964, p. 90.

This book is, among other things, an attempt to find new forms for expressing thoughts and ideas, traditionally the function of the essay. Since its invention by Montaigne in the 1500's, the essay has been made into (1) an instrument of torture for use in the schools; (2) a means for demonstrating one's mastery of the polished prose style admired by the upper class, a style which, at its worst, was found in the old *New Yorker* — "The other morning as we were preparing to embark for..." (3) an occasion for the overworked form of comedy known as self-deprecating humor, in which the author parades before us one of his numerous ineptitudes in the hope that we will smile and love him nevertheless; (4) a type of formal academic treatise. In short, the essay has become just another literary and academic formalism, that is, commodity, which is a long way from the rambling conversation with the reader which it originally was. (There isn't an English composition course in the country in which a student who wrote like Montaigne could get a passing grade.)

In the modern essay, we are presented with an argument which the author attempts to make as convincing, as objective, as possible (several essays in this book are of that form). In the academic world, it is unthinkable that one would do otherwise. I remember once asking a professor of linguistics why, in the university, one couldn't change one's mind on basic questions; why couldn't you hold such-and-such an opinion this year, write papers on it, and then, if you felt it was wrong next year, announce that fact? Her answer: "Because you are paid to maintain a point of view."

But only second-rate intellects view the intellectual life as one of *maintaining a point of view* (or of maintaining an exclusive interest in one subject, for that matter).

> "Thinking, analyzing, inventing .... are not anomalous acts; they are the normal respiration of the intelligence. To glorify the occasional performance of that function, to hoard ancient and alien thoughts, to recall with incredulous stupor that the *doctor universalis* thought, is to confess our laziness or our barbarity. Every man should be capable of all ideas and I understand that in the future this will be the case." — Borges, Jorge Luis, "Pierre Menard, Author of the

Quixote", in *Labyrinths*, New Directions, N.Y., 1964, p. 44.

I love workshops (but not writers' workshops!), notebooks, manuscripts with all the author's corrections and changes in clear view, used books with the previous readers' markings and notes; I love any record of someone's attempt to puzzle something out.

> Unlike modern readers, who follow the flow of a narrative from beginning to end, early modern Englishmen read in fits and starts and jumped from book to book. They broke texts into fragments and assembled them into new patterns by transcribing them in different sections of their notebooks. Then they reread the copies and rearranged the patterns while adding more excerpts. Reading and writing were therefore inseparable activities. They belonged to a continuous effort to make sense of things, for the world was full of signs: you could read your way through it; and by keeping an account of your readings, you made a book of your own, one stamped with your personality. — Darnton, Robert, "Extraordinary Commonplaces," *The New York Review of Books*, Dec. 21, 2000, p. 82.

And so I at first hoped I could find an essay style that was brutally blunt, immediate, full of contradictions, what-ifs, on-the-other-hands, the direct record of thoughts, as though of thoughts recollected under nitrous oxide. I once thought that a diary best accomplished this style, and I worked for several years at preparing one for publication. The result was the worst literary failure of my life. In other hands the diary may be a vital literary form, but not in mine.

The only alternative I could see was to collect and organize the various aphorisms and paragraphs in the diary, then expand on these as new thoughts occurred. And *not* to expand on anything for which no new thoughts occurred — in short, not to "develop" each idea in the academic sense, that is, add in trivial details so as to fill out some imagined proper number of pages. What aspiring author has not, at least for a time, in his youth ascribed a deep, literary significance to the number-of-pages or number-of-words requirements set forth by this or that authority — teacher, professor, magazine editor? "Submissions must be between 1500 and 2500 words in length". (Genius lies in having one's creations always turn out to be of exactly the right length!)

Thus, a book like this is not written, it is accumulated, it is constructed by accretion.

My aim is to write one and only one essay on a topic in my lifetime, beginning with a single sentence or paragraph, and then adding to it if I feel there is any reason to. My aim is to write a book consisting of only the good parts of the books I will never bother to write.

> My brevity is partly a result of a reluctance or inability to write. Delight in the act of writing breeds expansiveness. One shudders at the thought of the innumerable thick volumes which come into existance as a result of the sheer habit of writing. How many people with nothing to say keep writing so many pages a day in order that their body, particularly in old age, should perform its functions. — Hoffer, Eric, *Working and Thinking on the Waterfront*, Perennial Library, N.Y., 1969, p. 128.

But anyone who finds himself writing in this way, can't help but develop an interest in aphorisms and in the Nietzschean "paragraph", that is, in the intellectual task of saying what one wants as briefly and sharply as possible.

> The aphorism, the apophthegm...are the forms of 'eternity'; my ambition is to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book — what everyone else *does not* say in a book. — Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Twilight of the Idols*, "Expeditions of an Untimely Man", sect. 51, Penguin Books, N.Y., 1982, p. 104.

Putting the matter another way: the only difference between academics and me is that they require volumes to express their platitudes, whereas I only require a paragraph or two.

The value — and difficulty — of writing in the précis form I have been describing began to dawn on me as a result of years of studying alone. After days or weeks of attempting to understand a difficult subject in mathematics or computer science, I would find that the basic *form* of the subject could often be expressed in a page or two, and that if I had had this page or two when I started, my labors would have been vastly decreased The same applies to subjects in the humanities. Consider, for example, Thomas Khun's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d Edition, Enlarged, University of Chicago Press, 1970. Khun's basic idea is this: contrary to popular (and some scientific) opinion, science does not advance by merely "accumulating facts"; instead, first a paradigm of the world which a particular science deals with becomes accepted, for example, the Newtonian model of the universe; facts are then accumulated in accordance with this paradigm — this is what Kuhn calls "normal science" — until an anomaly occurs, that is, a phenomenon is observed that cannot be explained by the paradigm. Eventually, a new paradigm, for example, Einsteinian physics, emerges and replaces the old one, and normal science resumes under the new paradigm. This is a "first approximation" to Kuhn's book, which is 210 pages long. It is the approximation which is most often used when Kuhn's idea is applied, usually as a metaphor, to other fields than the hard sciences, for example, psychology and the history of art. I (and no doubt many other readers) could come up with a second approximation of, say, twice the length of the first, and so on. The question of how good these approximations are can be answered as follows: let any reader who has not read Kuhn's book, or heard about the ideas expressed in it, read a given approximation. Then ask that reader any relevant questions about material in the book, and grade his answers. Do the same with a similar reader, without letting him read the approximation. If the first reader does significantly better than the second, then we will call the approximation a good one. Now if it should happen that with, say, a twenty page approximation, most readers can correctly answer nearly all the questions put to them, then we will say that the book is unnecessarily long. I believe this would be found to be the case with Kuhn's book (which would in no way diminish the value of his idea). I believe it would be found to be the case with all books in sociology and education, for example. And also with some of the great classics, for example, Kant's *Prolegomena* and the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

This form inevitably forces the author to "collect his thoughts", to decide where each idea should go and then put it there, a task made manageable, if not actually made feasible, by the word processor, since a given idea may have to be moved many times.

Instead of producing more and more — of saying the same thing over and over in different words as is done in so many academic careers — the aim here is to polish and improve and expand on what is there.

> In New York, asked why he was reworking earlier canvases rather than simply painting new ones, [Mondrian] replied, "I don't want pictures. I just want to find things out. — Golding, John, "Mysteries of Mondrian", NYRB, June 22, 1995, p. 65.

In these academic-ridden times, unfortunately, aphorisms and Nietzschean paragraphs have no value; indeed, they are regarded with suspicion, for no self-respecting academic wants to see a literary form cultivated that encourages writers and readers to prefer shorter and fewer books. Yet, there are times when the discipline imposed by this form becomes essential for the health of the intellectual life (at least, for the intellectual lives of some) and I believe that the present is one of those times.

The second criticism that readers have made is that the lack of smooth transitions between successive paragraphs, particularly when the subjects vary as much as they do in the chapter, "Additional Thoughts", makes the book tedious to read. But the book was never intended to be *read* in the way that one reads a novel, that is, by starting at the beginning, and reading to the end, so that one can *have read it* and move on to the next book. It was intended to be picked up in idle moments, browsed in, read a little at a time, in any direction the reader might wish, just as one might read a dictionary or encyclopedia on one's bedside table.

In any case, "If I should attempt to follow that other style that is even, smooth and orderly, I could not attain it." — Montaigne, "Of presumption".

The third criticism is that the book is too "bitter". I cannot imagine how, in the 20th and 21st centuries, the worst centuries so far, any book can be too bitter, unless it is one that contains no humor at all, and that, I think the reader will agree, is not the case here.

A few final notes: (1) the term "we" in this book means everyone to whom what is said, applies; (2) the capitalized words "True" and "Truth", occasionally used satirically, refer to anything that is called "true", including, for example, metaphysical "truths", as well scientific and mathematical truths; (3) I have tried to use "U.S." instead of "America" because the latter term suggests a chauvinism that I do not wish to perpetuate; (4) the initials "S.f." stand for "Sunnyvale friend", a man who lives and works in the Silicon Valley town of Sunnyvale, Calif., and whom I used to occasionally run into in Berkeley coffee shops; (5) I have often fallen back on the traditional "he" to refer to anonymous persons because none of the alternatives seems to me any better: universally substituting "she" only shifts the arguments against "he" to the opposite sex; "he and/or she" is too clumsy; and "s/he" has no generally agreed upon pronunciation.

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