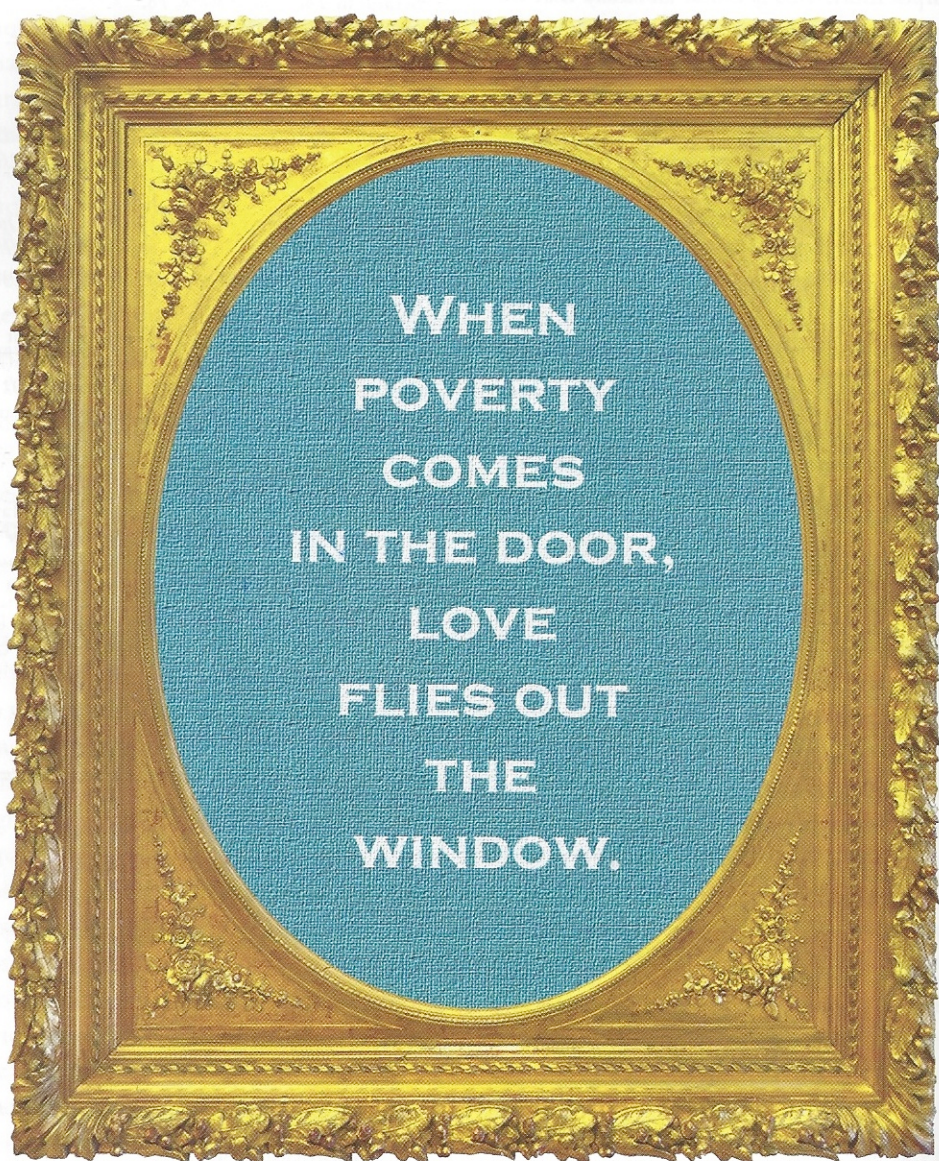




Recovering the Vernacular

Thomas Fitzgerald ✓

vernacular [L. *vernaculus*, native, indigenous, domestic].... 2. of a language or dialect spoken as a mother tongue by the people of a particular country or district, not learned or imposed as a second language (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993).

The crossing we made together over the river of time, to a new century and a new millennium, is now well behind us. We who arrived and stepped ashore did not, however, walk into a promised land. Nor did we discover a gap between past and future where we might see with new eyes. We were unable to leave behind the baggage of history—stuffed with memories, doubts, discontents, and grievances—collected during a hard and violent century.

I brought along my own bundled apprehension. Unpacked, it is as it was: a nagging unease, a persisting fatigue. Perhaps it is a contagion from artists and intellectuals, who have been telling us that civilized sensibility and spirit, accumulated over two millennia, have atrophied or been withdrawn as currency. Others have noticed a loss in a certain kind of thinking and knowing, which in turn has made some forms of talk less intelligible.

Language itself has become a troubled ground with contested borders, and as language moves, consciousness and habits of thought shift with it.

Italo Calvino wrote about those changes in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), a series of essays he completed just before his death in 1985. In this book, Calvino eloquently expressed his concerns about declining respect for certain qualities of language in late modernity and a fading of its distinctive, admirable character. Human faculties of imagination and envisioning are being threatened, he wrote, by “an unending rainfall of images ... a flood of prefabricated images,” that obscure direct experience, and by media that “transform the world ... by means of the phantasmagoric play of mirrors.” “We are bombarded today by such a quantity of images that we can no longer distinguish direct experience from what we have seen for a few seconds on television. The memory is littered with bits and pieces of images, like a rubbish dump,” as substance and expressiveness in language itself become inundated by that “plague.”

Calvino was hardly the first to worry about the expanded manufacture of illusion and its effects. Marshall McLuhan’s gallery of advertising

Thomas Fitzgerald, a former adjunct faculty member at Wayne State University in Detroit, has been a communications consultant, an organizational analyst, and a corporate planner. He has written for *Harvard Business Review*, *Organizational Dynamics*, the *American Journal of Education*, and the *University of Michigan Quarterly Review*.

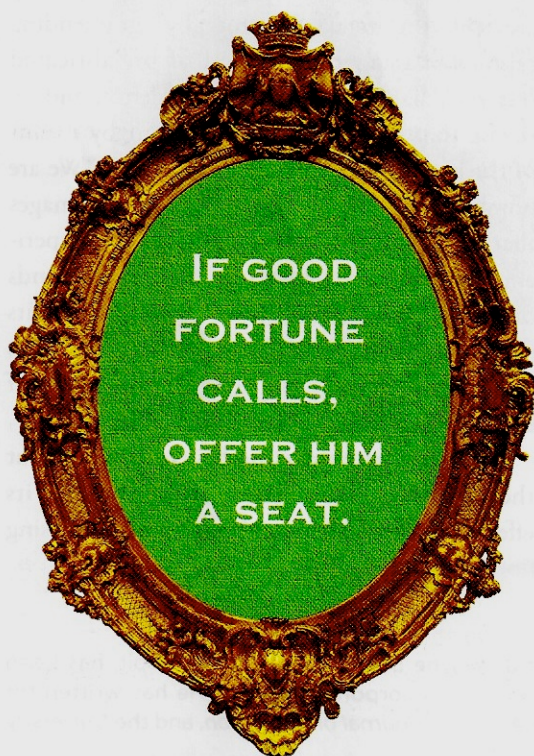
artifice, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), and his subsequent writing were credited in the 1950s with showing how any medium for communicating carries a message of its own. The technologies of each medium are both enabling and limiting, subtly altering what is said, heard, or seen. In the 1960s, McLuhan wrote that “we shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us.” Ironically, his oversimplified message eventually became a cliché, absorbed and neutralized by the message industry. Since then, other critics have complained, to little effect, about the electronic media’s blurring of distinctions between the actual and illusory, but for many people trained up by the screen, that blurring no longer seems to matter. Endlessly reshuffled surfaces, fleeting and interrupted, have become part of our surroundings, a visual din. They join the background noise, along with the roar of freeway traffic and TVs in airport bars that can’t be turned off.

Not for free. To live under a downpour of depleted imagery either dulls attention or

continually distracts it. The vast traffic of words, numbers, slogans, signals, messages, hurried pointings, and purported things undermines the clarity and distinctions on which people have depended to make sense and to decide. Disparities between the world as routinely experienced and representations offered to stand for it lead to fundamental questions as to whether it is still coherent enough to be captured in words. Venues now available for many more competing voices, together with the multiplying perspectives of our times—hailed as liberating diversity—serve as dispensation to believe in anything, everything, or nothing.

Expanding realms of electronic circuitry hardly suggest themselves as a source from which to retrieve or replace mislaid belief. Everyone agrees, of course, about the remarkable capacity of the digital domain. Unlike old libraries filled with books, where selection, access, and reading occurred at a deliberate pace, the circuits bring a rain of facts with the touch of a keyboard, then dispatch them with another. But scale, boundaries, and inherent connection are nonetheless destabilized in the particle storage process. Images of other images breed in a timeless, context-absent cyberspace. The essayist and critic Sven Birkerts, in his 1994 collection *The Gutenberg Elegies*, noted with some prescience how a different flow, pace, and patterning of expression is learned in computerized communication, inducing a shift to dumbed-down discourse and flattened content. “Simple linguistic prefab is now the norm, while ambiguity, paradox, irony, subtlety, and wit are fast disappearing,” Birkerts wrote. That change in telling and thinking, surely significant, goes largely unnoticed.

Writers on the left used to argue that *consciousness* is reshaped behind our backs by concealed economic forces, but over several decades ethnographers established (and journalists took over) the concept of *culture* as a freestanding entity to explain class and national differences to the public. By now, anyway, consciousness and culture have



been conflated by countless studies, even though the connective circuitry between them has never been satisfactorily worked out. But either one often serves as a handy equivalent to both, as it did for C. P. Snow in his often-cited *Two Cultures* (1959), in which he pointed to a breach between contrasting mentalities among major professions in the West. Snow observed that scientists and engineers think from one cognitive orientation, while academics in literature and the humanities hold to another—a situation that consequently polarizes debate about issues of public policy. Although Snow's characterization was exaggerated and later came down on the side of technocracy, he popularized the notion of opposed—and confining—orientations and mindsets, especially among the well credentialed.

The Decline of Proverbs

Snow did not go on to recognize how interests, styles, and cognitive frames shared by the two professional groups also unite them in their chosen distance from a larger realm, that of the non-elite. Nor did he notice that despite many differences, the two groups' outlooks, research methods, and specialized vocabularies have jointly expanded into every sphere of public life, as consistent with wider acceptance of instrumental rationality as the means of designing and managing civic programs. Their orientation—heard throughout the grammar of governance—replaced the older, much-ridiculed bureaucratese. It gained quasi-official status by crowding out other ways in which things are seen, said, and done. To that we will return.

Corresponding to that shift in language is a withdrawal of civic respect for vernacular speech and a situated understanding of local perspectives.

A minor but persuasive example is a form of speech already well in decline: *proverbs*. Once familiar admonitions and folk teachings, but less heard now, they still display and argue for the

neglected worth and importance of vernacular speech for knowing, reflecting, and valuing. By revisiting them as rhetorical comportment, we can also see how they differ from professional and managerial usages in content, voice, and response.

Who bothers with proverbs nowadays? Like adages, aphorisms, and maxims, proverbs are less said than looked up for speechwriters' copy. To appreciate proverbs is certainly not to praise all of them. Many are trite slogans:

Boys will be boys.

Finders keepers...

Opposites attract.

First come, first served.

Practice makes perfect.

Proverbs also include phrases that are unconvincing as common usage, sounding instead like epigrams, or lines better fit for the theater:

Caesar's wife is above suspicion.

Art is long but life is short.

Knowledge is power.

Some proverbs are mere scolding, or offer priggish advice:

Curiosity killed the cat.

If the shoe fits, wear it.

Empty vessels make the loudest noise.

Pretty is as pretty does.

Others not only contain much good sense, but also suggest a substantive way of life:

Fine words butter no parsnips.

If you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas.

They that dance must pay the fiddler.

The sweetest meat is next to the bone.

When poverty comes in the door, love flies out the window.

Instruction of the young in local virtues and values was supported by repetition of precepts without resort to a pulpit or fuss. Moral lessons would be cited with neither apology nor reproach:

*A fool and his money are soon parted.
A good deed is never wasted.*

When I was growing up in an Irish working-class neighborhood in New York, I must have heard old sayings from time to time, because in starting to write about them, I had no trouble recalling a few from life at home. My grandmother would intone, "Least said, soonest mended" and "The pot calls the kettle black!" If one of us sat in her favorite chair, she'd ask, "Would you jump in my grave as quick?" When still a girl, one of my father's Irish cousins came over on the *Titanic* in steerage (that is, part of the way over); she later married a plumber and lived to a great old age. When either of them said something like "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," I had no need to wonder about the sow or silk purses (since I had seen neither) because the context in which the motto was said and the firm cadence of its saying made the meaning clear enough.

Yiddish is another source of vigorous folk comment:

*If good fortune calls, offer him a seat.
When the sheep are shorn, the lambs tremble.*

And it was from a Greek coworker that I first heard "The shoemaker's children go barefoot."

A good friend of mine has Catalan parents, and he sometimes says, as we sit at table, "Where there is hunger there is no bad bread!" the words accompanied by an emphatic gesture he must have learned from his father. And when a proverb is said in the source language, inflection and alliteration add to its force: "*Il faut laver son linge sale en famille!*"

No need to claim that proverbs offer superior accounts of the world. My own view is that proverbs are illuminations, as are the counsels of the Oracle in the *I Ching* and abandoned means of instruction such as fables, allegory, the Märchen, and the Gospel parables. Proverbs ought to be regarded as bricolage, not formulas, as cameos, not panoramas. They can't be argued with, any more than one can argue with a gesture or a prayer, a song or a custom. As with haiku or a joke, you either get it or you don't. But folk sayings require a certain diffidence in today's world. As Calvino said about myth, "Any interpretation impoverishes... and suffocates it," adding that "with myths, one should not be in a hurry."

In the out-of-the-way places where proverbs are still heard, the best of them exemplify plain speaking and sensible conclusions, attractive in themselves, evocative of the grace of antiques and the tactile feel of early crafted objects. Even if they have long since become anachronisms, those things remind us of lives in other settings, other ways to live. In ethnographers' reports on everyday life and customs in non-Western cultures, we are similarly offered an opening for seeing the furnishings of our own time with fresh eyes. After spending time in a gallery of paintings, we notice that the gardens outside have become bright and clear for a few minutes, more "painterly." So too with handed-down maxims: We can step outside schooled to hear vivid and direct speech.

With comments on one thing and another, proverbs let us hear from unremarkable people taken up with routines in which they find themselves, getting on or getting by in places small enough to be known closely and well. Handed-down sayings witness similarities and differences that make sense of happenings where grander ideas don't apply.

Proverbial comment was compensation for the limited linguistic resources available to most people for expressing life's hoard of experience.

However slender, old precepts can recall, at times eloquently, stored learning immediately understood by those who hear it. The exchange of commonplaces comforts and satisfies; they affirm the continuity of life's lessons, layered in our half-remembered past.

The conclusions of proverbs are surely arbitrary. Their attention is selective. Everyday sense-making does not pretend to be based on any method. Contradictions can be found between the ample advice of this or that proverb. Although pronounced with unfailing conviction, any proverb could be accepted or declined without the hesitation—the chronic ambiguities—inculcated by our therapeutic culture. The disposition of an adage or maxim was to cast a steady eye of unblinking appraisal with a readiness to affirm qualitative distinctions. People learned from hearing sober lessons about the conduct of life over and over again, proffered in a form both concise and assertive:

*A liar must have a good memory.
Soon ripe, soon rotten.
Better cursed than pitied.*

Proverbs make plain, as do fables and tales, how people act “not much better than they are,” in canny acceptance that would be skeptical of contemporary promises to make people over. They patiently remind us as well of vices not to be denied, including avarice, sloth, and lechery:

*Dirty water will quench a fire.
A slice off a cut loaf is never missed.*

They speak of a time when *spite* could still be named for what it is, as could traits of a neighbor who was *sly* or *vain* or a *cuckold*. If sin were committed, the culpability of the sinner was assumed, with no cant about predisposing social factors. Other sayings, seldom heard nowadays, are notable for their unhesitating conclusions:

*Might as well hang for a sheep as a lamb.
Who sups with the Devil should have
a long spoon.
Put a beggar on horseback and he will ride
to Hell.*

As expressions of robust ordinary language, they can also serve to show differences with a contrasting order of communication, now ascendant and crowding out the vernacular, and much else. To that we turn.

The Grammar of Governance

The grammar of governance is a grammar in the sense of a standardized and uniform linguistic usage. Adopted without decision or announcement by large organizations, corporate bodies, and administrative agencies, it is so widely used that it attracts no comment. We see it daily in notices from banks, utilities, and insurance companies; letters from investment brokers; reports by research organizations; and statements by corporate and public officials. Although the managerial grammar lacks the usual grammatical rules, it displays internal coherence and consistent style. Messages from organizational tiers speak in a peremptory and decisive voice, as if issued by disciplined engineers, technicians, or accountants. As the lingua franca of business and commerce, it communicates top-down, issuing directions and procedures in a milieu of long-established practices and hierarchies.

Note how this vocabulary walls off large areas of valid individual experience: mind and creative thought, awareness and reflection, wishes, expectations and benevolent purposes, interpreted meanings, beliefs and values for guiding judgment. To translate all of those things, once accepted as distinctive aspects of humanness, into “behavioral” categories leaves no place for moral and aesthetic particularity. It is not surprising, then, if administrative grammar lacks color,



connection, cadence, energy, or spirit. Calvino's description of commodified communications applies here, as when he speaks of the plague affecting language, "that tends to level out all expression into the most generic, anonymous, and abstract formulas, to dilute meanings, to blunt the edge of expressiveness."

Prominent also is the emphasis on numerical facts and measurements of every kind, expressed through rankings, rates, percentiles, medians, correlations, profiles, weights, averaged scores, trend lines, ratios. In a circular effect, the publicizing of numerical facts has trained audiences to expect supporting numbers in any media commentary, as if solutions to problems cannot be reached without quantification.

Yet few outsiders are able to challenge the apparent validity of statistical measures when published in neat pie charts or formed into bar graphs for parading across screens, especially since sources of the research are remote and inaccessible. Fewer still are able to locate foundational assumptions of this or that study and the methodological compromises commonly used in working up data. Whatever its subtractions or distortions, numerical data is well suited

to computerized input-output processing, in which it acquires an enduring reality of its own. But as quantitative methods for describing the world come to define it and are taken as conclusive for public deliberations, they crowd out other, once valid knowledge not amenable to numerical formulation. Alternative interpretations of problem situations expressed in the irregular vernacular are met with condescension or dismissed as naive, uninformed.

Idioms of Administration

One impressive aspect of the quasi-official grammar is the lengthened reach of professional vocabularies and categories. In many agencies that do therapeutic social work, a comprehensive mental health glossary, the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, is used to assign classifying labels to clients (beyond their disputing) to medicalize the troubles of each. Common appreciations of sadness, remorse, and shame, or honor, courage, and kindness, are correspondingly passed over. Supposedly rational intervention can be seen these days in the prompt arrival, after a violent public event, of hired grief counselors who are summoned by units of government to interrupt and hurry along "the grieving process"—the open wailing and keening still heard in less-developed societies.

What Might Be Said for the Vernacular?

As ready language, vernacular speech moves easily when people talk together, for it routinely makes reference to (or implies) the speaker's and the listener's intentions, their visible disposition, presumed interests, and condition. Where individuals are grounded in a single, shared ordering of things, everyday talk can be fluent, without being expected to sort through multiple

epistemic orientations, each claiming authority. Where vernacular talk is exchanged as accepted public currency, few doubts are raised about a reality behind words and surfaces. The world has, after all, a palpable facticity. In that gratuitously present, centered place, comprehensible in its own terms, one can have ample confidence to permit, yes, require, judgments about it.

This shows up in vernacular speech generally, where intended meaning is grasped and confirmed when heard because it relies on tacit knowledge. In this regard, the historian Karl Weintraub calls attention to the neglected work of the twentieth-century philosopher José Ortega y Gasset on *creencias* (beliefs). This body of local truths needs no conscious assent because its conclusions, "which seem to be present before we begin to think," were settled for us long ago. Ortega y Gasset asserted that behind what he termed *creencias* stands an invisible but shared inheritance, a settled place of unstated assumptions and certitudes. Within their scope, conviction need not struggle with doubt. They are not dogma or absolutes, "not ideas which we *have*, but ideas which we *are*... not so much truths we 'have' as truths we inhabit." Compared to claims of the quasi-official grammar to uniformity, accuracy, and control, vernacular *creencias* provide an extensive repertory of practical understanding by which ordinary people—able, intelligent, and purposive—work out everyday problems.

As the theorist of cognition Jerome Bruner pointed out in *Acts of Meaning: Four Lectures on Mind and Culture* (1990), relevant information of that kind has been excluded over the years by psychometric studies of cognitive process in experimental situations. Bruner argued that a proper appreciation of human knowing and conduct would center on commonsense meanings along with explanatory stories and accounts offered by competent subjects. At the same time, narratives by ordinary people and families express a less articulated background of shared outlooks and expectations of intelligibility that underlie

and order everyday life. With a similar appreciation of the common values and traditions of people, the sociologist Peter Berger urges "cognitive respect," by which "one takes with utmost seriousness the meanings held by living human beings in any given situation" and "reject[s] all notions of 'raising the consciousness' of people or of otherwise pretending to know better than they what is good for them."

Recovering and Defending the Vernacular

While scientists' pursuit of certainty requires persistent doubt and distrust of appearances, that discipline may not be the most appropriate for our own examinations of the circumambient just-there. Multiplying descriptions or piling up facts about it will not ease its pain or assure its good. Among much else, moral and aesthetic learning is experienced directly; it is not assembled by the standard model of hypothesis-testing research.

Vernacular speech can suggest a humane sensibility toward ways of working and doing, and ought to be defended and even promoted in media narratives. Bred among the shared



experience of groups living in locales of everyday connection, mutual concern, and continual talk about the quotidian, the vernacular speaks of settled people. Scattered around the world are men and women with an ordinary understanding of themselves and their circumstances who can decide what needs to be done, accompanied by a capacity for initiative and action. "Common-sense wisdom," as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz noted in *Local Knowledge*, "is shamelessly and unapologetically ad hoc. It comes in epigrams, proverbs, *obiter dicta*, jokes, anecdotes, *contes moraux*—a clatter of gnomic utterances—not in formal doctrines or architectonic dogmas." He defends it for practicality and accessibility, and for being "capable of grasping the vast multifariousness of life in the world."

Geertz's comments recall a much older orientation, *phronesis*, the prudence and practical wisdom of good citizens extolled by Aristotle in his *Ethics*. *Phronesis* is learned within life worlds where tradition cultivates individual character, and teaches virtuous action, that is to say, doing what one ought so as to realize the good. Right action follows from prudent initiative and practical wisdom among people responsive to the particularity of a problematic situation. Joined in common purpose, they find together workable means consistent with their accepted ends. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer praised *phronesis* as "answerable rationality."

Phronesis stands in distinct contrast with reliance on codified procedures, the arid vocabulary of machine-model organization and expert explanations for every sort of problem. It cannot put forward statistical research, algorithmic rules, precise laboratory analysis, engineering standards, or funded projects for improving citizens. Principles of *phronesis* can, however, have implications for contemporary politics. By looking to the ability of people in routine exchange to make sound decisions for everyday life, arrived at with indigenous speech that might stand against encroaching systems and exclusionary

monologues, we could reaffirm democratic participation as can be observed in emergent republics in Africa and southeastern Europe.

The Future of Vernacular Understanding

Loosely bounded, semiautonomous realms of language and consciousness continue to circle each other. Regardless of the locale, when a language in use changes through internal drift or by borrowing or new values, some ways of viewing and knowing otherness shift in response, or may be put aside, neglected. As that continues, some thoughts over time become harder to think and to say, or, if said, to be heard. Eventually, crowded-out perspectives, downgraded terms, and left-behind assumptions retreat to obscure records (available to a resolute few), while others come forward. Even if the substantive out there has not itself changed very much, people will in time share and know a different world, as convincing as the earlier one.

Italo Calvino, while aware of the varied threats to language and thinking, looked to classic literary values to prevail:

Since science has begun to distrust general explanations and solutions that are not sectorial and specialized, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various "codes," into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world.

Despite Calvino's hope, millennial worries remain. They concern not only literature but the ability of common sensibility and everyday language to continue to resist dismissal by the cognitive rules, categories, and official vocabulary built into the technocratic grammar of research institutes, legal and medical practice, administrative bodies, curricula, government agencies, and journalism. Other threats continue to arrive with advances in molecular biology and neuroscience that radically revise long-accepted understandings of the nature

of the human person. Francis Fukuyama has outlined the consequences of societal acceptance of naturalism's revised definitions of life, along with use of radical biotechnology interventions, which cumulatively bring on—in the phrase with which he titled one of his books—“our posthuman future.”

Will the reductionist episteme and prestigious

ontology of genetic research—which assumes nothing more than cells and circuits—displace civilization's historical appreciation of human presence and its immanent spirit? Will it complete their translation into alien objectivity? If so, what kind of novels will we see published, what governance might we be required to serve, when our belief in mind—and spirit—is finally gone?

But how the “universal”
destruction / popularity
of individual ^{concurrent}
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