

THE (COMING) AGE OF THRESHOLDING

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THE (COMING) AGE OF THRESHOLDING

by

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The only critique of a philosophy that is possible and that proves anything, namely, trying to see whether one can live in accordance with it, has never been taught at universities: all that has ever been taught is a critique of words by means of other words.

*Friedrich Nietzsche*¹

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, 1983), p. 187.

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Preface

Somewhere D.W. Winicott writes that it is joy to be hidden, but disaster not to be found. In a complementary vein Joseph Conrad tells us that there is no rest for the messenger until the message is delivered. So long have these two remarks charmed me that I can no longer remember where they themselves are found, though they have definitely been delivered to me.

I see myself as a messenger of sorts and consider what I am about to convey important and potentially groundbreaking. I believe that we are entering into a new historical moment, a new period which will only be properly defined and named by those who come after us, as were the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Such a rapid change in the understanding of human life, however, is often first experienced as upheaval and anxiety. To lessen any destabilizing impact we must do all we can to find and come into this new era, which I have called *The Age of Thresholding*, with a better understanding of our past and present. Only then can the message our future holds be properly received.

Many have asked why and when our century's values came into being, and why they have been sustained in the manner in which they have. These are legitimate historical questions, and I hope to supply some answers. But other questions should be directed toward our future. Over what threshold might we be crossing and what will have been ventured? What will be gained, and what will be left behind?

My own contribution to defining and clarifying this historical shift is a small one. It would have been even less, however, had it not been for the support and the encouragement of the Earhart Foundation. It stood by me during a series of sabbaticals in which this project was getting framed and sorted out. Their commitment to intellectual

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adventure and to those conditions which support it made my work far more unfettered than it would otherwise have been. My special thanks go to David Kennedy, its President, and to Antony Sullivan, its Director of Program, who were helpful in many ways.

Pomona College has nurtured and put up with me for the whole of what passes as my adult life. It is said that educational institutions often thwart creativity because of the enormous demands they put on their faculties. This has not been true in my case, in fact nearly the opposite. The interchange between the classroom and the supposed solitude of the study has been consistently rewarding. The Research Committee of Pomona College, the Office of the Dean, and Pomona's President, Peter Stanley, have been consistently supportive along the way. I am most grateful.

Many of the ideas I claim as mine are of multiple and conversational origin. Often I give voice to deep and far ranging discussions in which I have been privileged to participate. These have been made possible by an extraordinary educational enterprise, the Liberty Fund, Inc. of Indianapolis, Indiana. The opportunities it has provided me have been the lifeblood of my intellectual journey. The world would be a better place if there were more such organizations. In any age of thresholding more will arise.

At a crucial moment I was aided by the insight and generosity of H. Tristram Engelhardt, the Editor of this Kluwer Series. Taking on this manuscript is only one of the many things he has done on my behalf. I appreciate him even more for the opportunities I have had to converse with him. That these conversations continue is a great joy to me.

I am reluctant to name names, for so many people have been a help to me in the course of the manuscript's writing. With advanced apologies to those I will not name, I wish to mention Timothy Fuller, John Cleese, Emilio Pacheco, David Martin, John Gray, William Whedbee, and Jack Abecassis. A special thanks to Dudley Poplak, a fellow thresholder.

But all the time, effort and friendships in the world would not have secured the completion of my undertaking. One person has done that, and this book is as much hers as mine. I am referring to Pien, Mr. R.'s unusual daughter, without whom any thresholding on my own part would probably not have taken place.

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