



POSITION

Of Work and Words: Craft as a Way of Telling

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following text reproduces in an abridged form the lecture that Tim Ingold gave during the workshop organized by Andrea Borsari and Ivano Gorzanelli on behalf of the Department of Architecture—University of Bologna and its PhD program in Architecture and Design Cultures, October 8, 2019 at DAMSLab in Bologna. The author has revised the text before publication.

ABSTRACT

This chapter takes issue with the notion of embodied knowledge by focusing on habit—the habit of craftsmen, artisans, musicians and scholars. The argument has two components. The first is to show that the habits that enable practitioners to move on in the accomplishment of their tasks are neither tacit nor sedimented in the body but generated and enacted in an attentive and kinaesthetic correspondence with tools, materials and environment. This correspondence is not silent and still but noisy and turbulent, open and alive to the world. To describe it, we adopt the notion of hapticality. In the domain of hapticality, thinking is the churn of a mind that stirs and is stirred by the sounds and feelings of the milieu. This why habitual action is also thoughtful, characterised by an awareness that is not so much cognitive as concentrative. This leads to the second part of the argument, which is to show that words, too, are living things, immersed in the currents of hapticality. Thus we refute the opposition, built into the constitution of the academy, between verbalisation and embodiment. Work and words, we insist, are animate. They both unfold in habit and afford ways of telling.

KEYWORDS

Making, Hapticality, Habitus, Embodied Knowledge, Telling.

<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2612-0496/10447>

ISSN 2612-0496

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Personal knowledge and the *habitus*

The greater part of what we know, we cannot explain. This is *savoir-faire*, or know-how. The philosopher Michael Polanyi¹ called it “personal knowledge”—knowledge that adheres so closely to the person of the practitioner that it cannot be held up to scrutiny or posited as an object of reflection or analysis. Without it, Polanyi argued, nothing could be practicably accomplished. We could not tie our shoelaces, beat an egg, hold a pen, or ride a bicycle. But nor, for that matter, could we design a building, solve an equation, or compose a symphony. It is not that there are no rules at all. But rather than furnishing the pegs that underpin the landscape of action, they more resemble signposts in the landscape itself, which point us in the direction we need to go. They are what we call rules of thumb, offering guidance without specification. In practice, they are more ostensive than prescriptive. Once set upon a course, we rely upon the reservoir of personal knowledge to carry on.

Now here as elsewhere, Polanyi could hardly have been more emphatic that what his inquiries had disclosed was a realm of *mind*—a “mental domain”—the existence of which had been previously unacknowledged, or that until then, had not been accorded its due. Yet his discovery was destined to suffer an ignominious fate at the hands of subsequent social theory which had, albeit belatedly, realised that human beings are only present in the world because they have, or rather *are*, their bodies. This realisation is commonly traced back to an influential essay on “Techniques of the body,” penned by the ethnologist Marcel Mauss in 1934.² Drawing attention to the sheer diversity of postures and gestures involved in such everyday tasks as walking, carrying loads, eating and sleeping, Mauss realised that there is more to this than the kind of idiosyncratic variation that marks one individual from another and that in French would be called *habitude*. It is not just a matter of what you might happen to pick up or, conversely, of what you might improvise for yourself. Some children, Mauss noted, are more inclined than others to imitate the behaviour they observe around them, yet both weak and strong imitators, if they belong to the same society, are similarly educated by example and correction into forms of bodily comportment deemed proper to their age and status. To denote these forms, socially imposed rather than individually acquired, attributable to education rather than imitation, and thus enshrined in a tradition, Mauss co-opted the Latin term *habitus*.³

1. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

2. Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (February 1, 1973): 70–88.

3. *Ibid.*, 73.

Thus when some forty years later, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu⁴ reintroduced the *habitus* as the centrepiece of a theory of practice centred upon the dispositions of the body, few recalled that he was following the precedent set by Mauss—nor did Bourdieu go out of his way to acknowledge the fact. Perhaps it was as well that he did not, since he took the term in a quite different sense. By *habitus*, Bourdieu means a kind of practical mastery—a capacity to improvise conduct strategically attuned to the conditions of its production—that is neither picked up haphazardly, as one might pick up an infection, simply through personal contact, nor deliberately inculcated through precept and prescription. “Every society,” Bourdieu writes, “provides for *structural exercises* tending to transmit this or that form of practical mastery.”⁵

The silence of explication

Here I want to take issue with the notion of embodied knowledge, by focusing on what I shall call *habit*—the habit of craftsmen, artisans, musicians and scholars. My argument has two components. The first is to show that the habits that enable practitioners to move on in the accomplishment of their tasks are not so much sedimented in the body as generated and enacted in an attentive and kinaesthetic correspondence with tools, materials and environment. And the second is to insist that this is as true of working with words as it is of working with non-verbal materials. To reach the domain of habitual practice, then, does not mean giving up on words, or probing beneath them. But it does mean giving up on the techniques of intellectual distillation that allow words to float to the top, and habits to sink to the bottom, of some imaginary column of consciousness.

“Whereof one cannot speak,” concluded Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, “thereof one must be silent.”⁶ Taken literally, this austere pronouncement would consign to an ocean of silence all ways of knowing and doing, all wisdom and experience, save that which can be expressed, linguistically or mathematically, in the form of logically interconnected propositions. Now it was Polanyi’s contention, of course, that these expressions amounted to no more than the tip of an iceberg, the overwhelming mass of which lay submerged beneath the waves. His purpose was not to denigrate this submarine dimension but to highlight its contribution to thought and practice. The things, of which we cannot speak, he would say, are also things without which we cannot do. Derived from the Latin *tacere*, “to be silent,” it refers in the first place to that which remains unvoiced. Yet voiced sounds need not be verbal, and verbal

4. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

5. *Ibid.*, 88.

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1922), 90.

utterances need have no explicit propositional content. What are we to make, for example, of a song without words? And what of an utterance the force of which illocutionary—such as a warning, a greeting or a direction? Conversely, of many things that could be stated explicitly we may prefer to keep our mouths shut, for reasons of discretion or security.

So what does Polanyi mean by explication? Two terms keep cropping up in his account of what it entails, namely, specification and articulation (see, for example, Polanyi 1958, 88). To specify means to pin things down to fixed coordinates of reference, to articulate means to join them up into a complete structure. Thus we specify when we plot dots on a graph, enter values in an equation, or type words on a page; we articulate when we join them up: dots with lines. As these examples indicate, explication is not limited to verbal forms; it may also be algebraic or mathematical, or expressed in the peculiar language of symbolic logic. And it may also occur in the conventions of musical notation, where each note is specified by a dot, and where the dots are joined into phrases by ligatures. What do the graph, the mathematical equation, the written sentence and the scored phrase have in common? They are all absolutely silent. Where everything is pinned down and joined up, nothing can move. And without movement there can be no sound. Specification and articulation, while they may be the keys to logical explication, lock the doors to movement, to sound and to feeling. Indeed, *it is the explicit that is tacit*, not the reservoir of habit or know-how for which Polanyi reserved the term. Habit, on the other hand, is turbulent and sometimes noisy. It swirls around in between the points that explicit knowledge joins up, like waters flowing around and between the islands of an archipelago.⁷

Habits, in short, are not embodied; rather the body—in its habitation of a world—is ensounded. Consider what happens, for example, when I play a single note on an open string of my cello. On the score the note is specified by a dot, crossed by a stave line. There it is, silent, lifeless and inert. But as soon as I begin to play, it erupts into sound, into life. The notated point becomes a sustained and vibrant line. This is no simple matter, and to succeed in it my body must be finely balanced and tensed throughout, with an acute awareness of its immediate environs, while my right arm, elbow and wrist undergo a controlled movement to ensure that the position where the bow touches the string, between bridge and fingerboard, remains more or less constant. The sound arises from this complex choreography of highly attentive, mutually attuned movements. Indeed in bowing a note on the cello as in any other task, as even Polanyi acknowledged, we “feel our way forward.”⁸ Yet in the appeal to the tacit this entire domain of feeling is blanked out; silenced and stilled.

7. Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Routledge, 2013), 111, see Figure 3.

8. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 62.

Telling in the zone of hapticality

Tacit, in short, is a misnomer for the dimension of habitual practice. By what better term, then, should it be known? I would like to borrow a concept from educational theorist Stefano Harney and literary scholar Fred Moten, namely *hapticality*. It lies, in their words, in “a feel for feeling others feeling you.”⁹ In effect, hapticality fills the void of the tacit. Where the tacit is silent, the haptic is noisy; where the tacit is embodied, the haptic is animate; where the tacit is sunk into the depths of being, the haptic is open and alive to others and to the world. Nor need this be limited to the sphere of human relations. Other kinds of beings, or other phenomena, make their presence felt in manifold ways, and we should attend to them too.

Does hapticality, then, lie on the far side of speaking, of telling? Only if, with Wittgenstein, we limit speaking to logical expression or, with Polanyi, limit telling to literate articulation. Yet in truth, no words could be spoken, nor could any story be told, without feeling. At this stage of my argument I want to focus on telling, and will return to speaking in due course, when I move on from works to words. I want to argue, to the contrary, that we can tell *all* we know, but only because there is more to telling than articulation.¹⁰ “To tell” is one of those ancient verbs that comes to us already densely packed with multiple layers of meaning. Originally, it was to count or to reckon, as does the teller who tots up the bill, whose modern representative is the accountant. An account rendered in words rather than numbers, however, is a narrative, a story. What, then is the difference between the accountant and the storyteller?

One adds up; the other goes along. Storytellers are wayfarers. It is through having their stories told that novices learn to attend to things, and to what they afford, in the situations of their current practice. Contrariwise, it is because of the resulting feel for things—a kind of intimacy that comes from sharing a life together—that experienced practitioners can tell their stories. The capacity to tell, in these twinned senses, is critical to the practice of any craft, and it is perhaps the principal criterion by which the master can be distinguished from the novice. On the one hand, stories allow practitioners to tell of what they know *without* specifying it. They carry no information in themselves, no coded messages or representations. They rather offer guidance or directions which listeners, finding themselves in a situation similar to that related in the story, can recognise and follow. On the other hand, the feel for things allows practitioners to tune their movements to the ever-varying conditions of the task as it unfolds. This, and not in the practised ability to execute standardised movements with greater speed or ergonomic efficiency, is where real skill resides.

9. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 98.

10. Ingold, *Making*, 111.

In both senses, then, craft is a way of telling. It is a way, however, that abhors explication.

In short, haptic telling is a process of what I have elsewhere called “interstitial differentiation.”¹¹ It is a differentiation that proceeds along the way, in a cycle of attention and response. In wayfaring, in playing a musical instrument, in the practice of any craft, decisions have continually to be made: one decides to veer in this direction or that. But while every decision entails a cut, this cut goes along the grain of action rather than across it, splitting it like an axe through timber. This is what skill is about: not imposing form on matter but finding the grain of things and bending it to an evolving purpose.¹²

Vortices of thinking and of sound

All this attention and response, all these decisions, are surely proof that craft practitioners are thinking. Indeed, it has become almost a cliché to say that musicians or craftspeople think with their fingers, with their hands, their wrists, lungs and trunk, indeed with the whole body. But have you ever wondered why we should think that thinking should be silent? Or that it should be invisible? Surely, if thinking is not tacit but as haptic as feeling is, if it is not buried in the body but overflows into the environment, if it unfolds in the telling, then it can be just as noisy. And we can watch it too. The alleged silence of thinking is perhaps the legacy of a Cartesian division between cognition and action that continues to plague much theorising on these matters. For they are perfectly capable of thinking, even of reflecting on what they are doing and of assessing their work, *without ever breaking away from performance*. “Reflection,” as anthropologist Anna Portisch writes, “is a constitutive aspect of all levels of practice.”¹³

Portisch pitches her critique against many students of craft practice, myself included,¹⁴ who have argued that the frequent need to reflect on progress, or to stop-and-check, is typical of novice practitioners, giving their work a jerky or stop-go character which gradually disappears with increasing mastery of the craft. In this view, the more fluent the practitioner, the less reflective the practice. But from her own study of women’s crafts in Mongolia, Portisch concludes, to the contrary, that reflection and assessment are integral to the practices of novices and accomplished craftswomen alike. Learning a craft, she argues, is at every level a process

11. Tim Ingold, *The Life of Lines* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2015), 23.

12. Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (Taylor & Francis, 2011), 211.

13. Anna Odland Portisch, “The Craft of Skilful Learning: Kazakh Women’s Everyday Craft Practices in Western Mongolia,” in *Making Knowledge: Explorations of the Indissoluble Relation Between Mind, Body and Environment*, ed. Trevor H. J. Marchand (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 69.

14. Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), 415.

that is both dynamic and responsive, involving a continual dialogue with one's environment.¹⁵ I am persuaded by her argument, but I still wonder whether reflection and assessment mean quite the same thing for the novice as for the old hand. It seems to me that the difference lies in the extent to which the practitioner has incorporated the tools and materials of her trade, as well as other salient constituents of the environment, into the dialogue itself. True, the old-hand is as thoughtful, as meditative and reflective, as the novice, if not more so. But perhaps she is thinking *with* things more than she is thinking *about* them, letting them in as accessory to her own reflections. Perhaps her thinking is that of a mind that is not confined within the body but that extends outwards to include tools, materials and surrounding conditions, or what philosopher of cognition Andy Clark calls its "wideware."¹⁶ Could the measure of enskillment lie in the distal extension of the mind, radiating outwards from its seat in the body? The answer depends on how we choose to describe the mind.

For Clark, the mind is essentially a computational device that works to produce solutions to problems posed by the environment, on the basis of information received. But this device may include extra-somatic components. A mathematician, for example, may use pencil and notepad to perform a calculation, and a navigator takes up ruler and compass to plot a course. To explain what he means by the extended mind, and by way of analogy, Clark asks us to consider the prodigious talents of a fish, the blue-fin tuna. Why, Clark asks, can the tuna swim so fast? The answer is that it couples its own bodily energies to the fluid dynamics of the water through which it swims, setting up eddies and vortices through the swishing of its tail and fins which themselves exert a propulsive momentum beyond any muscular force of which the fish alone is capable. Swimming, then, is not an achievement of the fish alone but of what Clark calls a swimming machine, comprised by "the fish in its *proper context*: the fish plus the surrounding structures and vortices that it actively creates and then maximally exploits."¹⁷ Thus, strictly speaking, it is not the fish that swims, but the fish-in-the-water. Clark's point is that the cognitive machine, in the human case, is extended in just the way that the swimming machine is for the fish.

I am not so sure that even swimming can be understood in such mechanical terms. After all, eddies and vortices cannot exactly be connected up like the wheels, cranks and pistons of an engine, in such a way as to deliver propulsion as a motor effect. They are energetic movements in themselves, as indeed is the fish. To borrow an expression from philosopher Stanley Cavell, the fish-in-the-water—like every other living

15. Odland Portisch, "The Craft of Skilful Learning: Kazakh Women's Everyday Craft Practices in Western Mongolia," 71–73.

16. Andy Clark, "Where Brain, Body, and World Collide," *Daedalus* 127, no. 2 (1998): 257–280.

17. *Ibid.*, 272.

being in its proper medium—is a “whirl.”¹⁸ It is not an object that moves but the emergent form of a movement. Might the fish, then, offer a better analogy for why the thinking that goes into craft practice *cannot* be understood in computational terms? Perhaps we could say of this thinking, too, that it is a churning of the mind, as it stirs up and is in turn stirred by the sounds and feelings of its milieu. The mind, then, is not so much a computational device as a vortex in the mix. How else can a player armed only with a cello make such an immense and variable sound? Not, surely, because the practitioner’s brain, body and instrument, joined together, make up a machine for playing.

In playing the cello, the anatomical unity of practitioner plus instrument gives way to a hapticality of sensory awareness and vital materials. It is for this reason that I believe we should resist the temptation to describe mind, body and world as overlapping circles which, in their enlargement, are inclined to encroach upon or even encompass each other’s domains.

The principle of habit

We have come a long way from Bourdieu, and from his understanding of the *habitus* as a set of dispositions that both generate the mastery of the skilled practitioner, and are in turn generated by it, all beneath the radar of conscious awareness. For what we have discovered, on the other side of explicit logical articulation, is not a lack of awareness but *an awareness of a different kind*. It is the awareness of feeling others feeling you—or in a word, hapticality. This explains why craftspeople, absorbed into their tasks, by their own report tend to experience their own presence and movement, and the presence and movement of the persons and things with whom and with which they engage, with heightened rather than diminished intensity. Colloquially, the word we use for this is *concentration*. By this, we don’t mean the kind of cognitive processing that delivers solutions for implementation. It is not the operation of a joined-up computational mechanism, whether inside the head or extending beyond it. Concentration lies rather in the affective unison of haptic and kinaesthetic awareness with the movement and vitality of materials. The recognition of this other form of awareness, concentrative rather than cognitive, haptic rather than explicit, allows us at last to resolve a question to which the answer has long eluded us. For there is no doubt that many things we routinely do involve no concentration at all. In principle, automatic operations could just as well be done by machine, and indeed in the history of technology they have often been among the first to be mechanised. The question is: how are we to distinguish such automatisms from the practised mastery of a craft?

18. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 52.

You would think, from reading much of this literature, that there is not much difference between touch-typing and performing a Rachmaninov piano concerto. It may be that the latter is a lot more difficult, and takes a great deal of practice that none but the most dedicated musician would willingly endure. In both cases, however, we are led to believe that it is all a matter of leaving the fingers to take care of themselves, freeing the mind for higher things. But if the pianist is truly thinking with his fingers, if his thought flies with the sounds of the keys, if he feels the presence of listeners whose ears stretch to catch every passing sound, and if he and they are truly moved by the experience, then there is all the difference in the world between his performance and—say—that of a player-piano that has been mechanically programmed to reproduce the same piece. And the difference is simply this: the master-pianist's performance unfolds along a way of telling, the machine performance does not. The ossification of telling in the language of embodiment, its reduction to a kind of sediment, has its parallel in the way we tend to speak of habit. It has become common to treat as habits the things we do unthinkingly, and without consideration. They are often regarded as the unwanted detritus of ordinary activity, behaviours that have fallen out of active commerce with the world and become stuck in repetitive patterns that may have meant something once but no longer have significance today. They do not require to be learned so much as unlearned. Usually they are judged to be bad. When did you last hear anyone talking about their "good habits"? And what is most particular to it is the way the practitioner is *inside* the action. Do we make our habits or do our habits make us? The problem arises so long as we are forced to choose between the active and the passive voice of the verb, that is, between what we do and what we undergo. But in his reflections on *Art as Experience*, philosopher John Dewey argued that we would do better to understand habit in terms of the relation between the two. Neither in front of what we do nor behind it, we are in the midst: our doing is also our undergoing, what we do is also done in us. In our intercourse with the world, Dewey explained, we also inhabit the world.¹⁹ Or in a word, we *dwell* in habit. This, perhaps, is as good a definition as any of what it means to practise a craft. A way of telling is also a way of dwelling, of inhabiting. Moreover, it is also a way of using.

Beyond verbalisation and embodiment

For most of us, as we go about our lives, words furnish our principal means of telling. With them, we invite others to gather round, converse with them, join our own life-stories with theirs, attend and respond to what they say and do. Enriched by the patina of everyday use, ever-varying in

19. John Dewey, "Art as Experience," in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953, Vol. 10: 1934*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 109; cf. Tim Ingold, *Anthropology and/as Education* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2017), 21–22.

texture, they rise up in the gestures of the mouth and lips in speech, or spill out onto the page in the traces of the writer's hand. As philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty once put it,²⁰ they are so many ways we have of singing the world and its praises. We could say that words mediate a poetics of habitation. Yet as we look around, it seems that something has gone seriously wrong in our relations with words. It is as though they have turned against us, or we against them. We routinely hold them to blame for the suppression of feeling, or for failing to account for the authenticity of experience. To get to what it really feels like, we insist, we have to get beneath the words, or behind them. Words, it seems, are no longer our habit, our custom or our dress. Rather, they have become the means by which we dress things up, coating them with a gloss that obscures the truth these things might otherwise tell if left to be themselves. Of course there are still people who use words to plumb the depths of human feeling. But they have become the purveyors of a specialist, and for many an arcane, craft. Instead of inhabiting the world poetically, we have created a little niche in the inhabited world for poets.²¹

Perhaps no contemporary community has developed more of an antipathy towards words than that which principally works with them. I mean the community of scholars, and above all, those scholars who would regard themselves as academics. In the surgery of academic thought it is essential that categorical boundaries are maintained, and it is the job of words to do so: to put things at a distance, to pin them down, to impose a discipline, and to hold an otherwise unruly world to account. This is what they mean by objectivity, and words are the means by which they achieve it.

This is why academic words so often sound neutered, their force annulled by a triple lock of suffixes: *-ise*, *-ate*, and *-ion*. Thus does "use," for example, become "utilisation." As I have already mentioned, to use something, and be used to it, is to draw it into your custom. Not so, however, with utilisation. For to utilise an object is to turn it to one's benefit while holding it at a remove. It is to deny any affective involvement, or common feeling. The same goes for many other weapons of the academics' armoury. If they never use anything if not to "utilise"; then nor do they say anything if not to "articulate," mean anything if not to "signify," tell anything if not to "explicate." In short, the academic is an articulator of verbal compositions. To articulate, as we have already seen, is to join things *up*, not to join *with* them. It is because of this penchant for articulation that the idea of word-processing, anathema to the writer's craft, found such a warm reception in the land of academia. If words are objects, to be arranged at will, what could be more natural than serving them to a machine for processing?

20. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 187.

21. Alfred Gell, "The Umeda Language-Poem," *Canberra Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 1979): 61.

The appeal to signification, likewise, is a way of holding the world at a distance. To find what things mean, you only have to work with them. But in a world of signs we never touch anything directly; feeling is interrupted. Signification breaks the link of direct perception, just as articulation breaks the link between hand and word. If meaning is hands-on; signification is hands-off. So it is, too, with explication. It is not enough for the academic to tell of what he knows. It must be explicated, spelled out in a joined-up sequence. Every such sequence is a sentence. For their sentencing of words, however, and the repression of feeling it entails, most academics feel a shadow of guilt. Their tendency, however, is to shift the guilt onto their accessories, onto the words themselves. For having first used words to put things at a distance they then accuse not just *their* words but *all* words of setting up obstacles, of getting in the way of the unmediated relation with lived experience for which they yearn.

The result is the opposition between verbalisation and embodiment, the one allegedly explicit, the other tacit, that so much academic analysis has taken as its starting point. My objective, to the contrary, has been to restore both words and habits, ways of speaking and ways of telling, to hapticality. Habits are no more sedimented in the body than words liberated from it; rather, both words and habits are *animate*. They are ways of being alive. Let's not be afraid, then, to meet the world with words. Other creatures do it differently, but verbal intercourse has always been our human way, and our entitlement. Words are human things. But let these be words of greeting, not of confrontation, of questioning, not of interrogation or interview, of response, not of representation, of anticipation, not of prediction. This is not to say that we should all become poets or novelists, let alone that we should seek to emulate philosophers who, when it comes to their worldly involvements, have signally failed to practice what they preach, and for whom neither coherence of thought nor clarity of expression has ever been among their strongest suits. But it does mean that we scholars should work our words as craftspeople work their materials, in ways that testify, in their inscriptive traces, to the labour of their production, and that offer these inscriptions as things of beauty in themselves.

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