

POSITION PAPER

Poised on the Perilous Point

The strategic is as urgent as the urgent

by Nicholas Dungan

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*Here, then, at home, by no more storms distress,
Folding laborious hands we sit, wings furled;
Here in close perfume lies the rose-leaf curled,
Here the sun stands and knows not east nor west,
Here no tide runs; we have come, last and best,
From the wide zone through dizzying circles hurled,
To that still centre where the spinning world
Sleeps on its axis, to the heart of rest.*

*Lay on thy whips, O Love, that we upright,
Poised on the perilous point, in no lax bed
May sleep, as tension at the verberant core
Of music sleeps; for, if thou spare to smite,
Staggering, we stoop, stooping, fall dumb and dead,
And, dying so, sleep our sweet sleep no more.*

In *Gaudy Night*, the exquisite novel by Dorothy L. Sayers published in 1935, Harriet Vane, a mystery writer and the book's protagonist, returns to Oxford, where she writes the first eight-line stanza of this sonnet, a description of the peacefulness of her *alma mater* but equally a *billet doux* for Lord Peter Wimsey, Sayers's aristocratic detective hero. Discovering the opening stanza, Wimsey pens the subsequent sestet and so completes the sonnet, but in contrapuntal mode, rejecting the 'still centre' in favour of an upright, activist position: 'poised on the perilous point'.

There is a widespread conviction in the world today that we are poised on the perilous point of a human revolution.

This is manifested in an eerie feeling throughout the globe that all of humanity is somehow at a tipping point, an inflection point, poised on the perilous point between success and failure—faced with an opportunity, by adopting radically different behaviours towards each other and towards our habitat, to thrive as a united species, lest, through ignorance or division, 'Staggering, we stoop, stooping, fall dumb and dead'.

This human revolution is many phenomena at once: spiritual and humanistic but also political and economic.

The spiritual revolution comprises both stanzas of the sonnet: the desire for inner peace combined with a robust call to action. This duality of serenity and determination finds expression also in a recent [video](#) (in which the cellist is Isabelle Dungan of CogitoPraxis). We need both: contemplation and action, both *cogito* and *πρᾶξις*.

The humanistic revolution arises from the shared human experiences, one on top of the other, of the Covid19 pandemic and the worldwide movement for racial justice. These experiences, far from separate or distinct, are intimately connected. Analysts, thinkers and leaders from around the world agree that the future must be more humanistic.

The political revolution is made plain in the desire on the part of world leaders to unite to support positive change. This resolve was expressed in the exceptional webinar organized by the World Economic Forum arguing for a '[Great Reset](#)' of the world and announcing that this will be the theme of the Davos meeting in January 2021. (In an upcoming position paper, CogitoPraxis will examine the range of stakeholders who need to be drawn into such a reset, and how to attract them.) To be sure, not all the world's political leaders, or business or other leaders, subscribe to the tenets of stakeholder capitalism. Some holdouts look to be trapped in old ways of thinking that privilege hostile rivalry, raw competition and Darwinian destruction over cooperation, collaboration and consensus. But the winds of change are blowing against them.

The economic revolution will test the mettle of business and financial leaders everywhere. In his opening remarks of the Great Reset webinar, the [Prince of Wales](#) stressed that there has never been a time when the involvement of, and commitment from, the private sector has been more crucial. We have seen business and financial leaders such as Jamie Dimon of J P Morgan [speak out](#) against racism. In France, for example, [Pierre-André de Chalendar](#), CEO of Saint-Gobain, and [Jean-Pierre Clamadieu](#), chairman of Engie, support the conviction, as do chief executives from around the world, that the Covid19 crisis can serve as a model for facing climate change and enhancing sustainability.

The challenge for everyone—from the loftiest decision-makers to every single ordinary citizen in her or his daily life—will consist of one choice: whether to prioritise the long term over the short term, the fundamental over the circumstantial, the strategic over the urgent. For, as the opportunity and the hope of this human revolution make plain, the strategic is at least as urgent as the urgent.