

The Houses of Dead and Crooked Souls

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“A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability.” — Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

There is a vast and growing gulf between the world's rich and poor. An obscene gulf. If we can read houses, they will confirm this. They offer a visible lesson in social class.

Houses stand before us like books on a shelf waiting to be read, and when the books are missing, as they are for a vast and growing multitude of the homeless exiled wandering ones and those imprisoned, their absence serves to indict the mansion-dwelling wealthy and to a lesser extent those whose homes serve to shield them from the truth of the ill-begotten gains of the wealthy elites who create the world's suffering through their avarice, lies, and war making.

Many regular people want to say with Edmund in Eugene O'Neill's play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*:

The fog is where I wanted to be. Halfway down the path you can't see this house. You'd never know it was here. Or any of the other places down the avenue. I couldn't see but a few feet ahead. I didn't meet a soul. Everything looked and sounded unreal. Nothing was what it is. That's what I wanted – to be alone with myself in another world where truth is untrue and life can hide from itself...Who wants to see life

as it is, if they can help it?

Yet the rich don't hide or give a damn. They flaunt their houses. They know they are crooks and creators of illusions. Their nihilism is revealed in their conspicuous consumption and their predatory behavior; they want everyone else to see it too. So they rub it in their faces. Their wealth is built on the blood and suffering of millions around the world, but this is often hidden knowledge.

For many regular people prefer the fog to the harsh truth. It shields them from intense anger and the realization that the wealthy elites who run the world and control the media lie to them about everything and consider them beneath contempt. That would demand a response commensurate with the propaganda – rebellion. It would impose the moral demand to look squarely at the houses of death with their tiny cells in which the wealthy elites and their henchmen imprison and torture truth tellers like Julian Assange, an innocent man in a living hell; to make connections between wealth and power and the obscene flaunting of the rich elite's sybaritic lifestyles in houses where every spacious room testifies to their moral depravity.

The recent news of Barack Obama's vile selfie birthday celebration for his celebrity "friends" at his 29-acre estate and mansion (he has another eight-million-dollar mansion in Washington, D. C.) on Martha's Vineyard is an egregious recent case in point. If he thinks this nauseating display is proof of his stability and strength – which obviously he does – then he is a deluded fool. But those who carry water for the military-intelligence-media complex are amply rewarded and want to tell the world that this is so. It's essential for the Show. It must be conspicuous so the plebians learn their lesson.

Obama's Vineyard mansion stands as an outward sign of his

inner disgrace, his soullessness.

Trump's golden towers and his never-ending self-promotion or the multiple million-dollar mansions of high-tech, sports, and Hollywood's superstars send the same message.

Take Bill Gates' sixty-three-million-dollar mansion, Xanadu, named after William Randolph Hearst's estate in *Citizen Kane*, that took seven years to build.

Take the house up the hill from where I live in an erstwhile working-class town that sold for one million plus and now is being expanded to double its size with a massive swimming pool that leaves no grass uncovered. Every week, three black window-tinted SUVs arrive with New Jersey plates to join two white expensive sedans to oversee the progress in this small western Massachusetts town where McMansions rise throughout the hills faster than summer's weeds.

Take the blue dolomite stone Searles Castle with its 60 acres, 40 rooms, and "dungeon" basement down the hill on Main St. that was recently bought by a NYC artist who also owns seven grand estates around the country that he showcases as examples of his fine artistic taste. "All these houses have endless things to do – it's just mind-boggling," he has said. The artist, Hunt Slonem, calls himself a "glamorizer," and his "exotica" paintings, inspired by Andy Warhol's repetition of soup cans and Marilyn Monroe, hang in galleries, museums, cruise ships, and the houses of film celebrities. Like his showcase houses, his exotica must have endless things to do.

What would Vincent van Gogh say? Perhaps what he wrote to his brother Theo: that the greatest people in painting and literature "have always worked *against the grain*" and in sympathy with the poor and oppressed. That might seem "mind-boggling" to Slonem.

Such ostentatious displays of wealth and power clearly reveal the delusions of the elites, as if there are no spiritual

consequences for living so. Even if they read Tolstoy's cautionary tale about greed, *How Much Land Does A Man Need?*, it is doubtful that its truth would register. Like Tolstoy's protagonist Pahóm, they never have enough. But like Pahóm, the Devil has them in his grip, and like him, they will get their just rewards, a small room, a bit of land to imprison them forever.

His servant picked up the spade and dug a grave long enough for Pahóm to lie in, and buried him in it. Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed.

Where does the money for all these estates, not just Slonem's, come from? Who wants to ask?

Getting to the roots of wealth involves a little digging. Slonem's castle was originally commissioned in the late 1800s by Mark Hopkins for his wife. Hopkins was one of the founders of the Central Pacific Railroad, which was built by Irish and Chinese immigrants. Labor history is quite illuminating on the ways immigrants have always been treated, in this case "the dregs of Asia" and the Irish dogs. Interestingly enough, the great black scholar and radical, W. E. B. Du Bois, a town native, worked at the castle's construction site as a young man. No doubt it informed his future work against racism, capitalism, and economic exploitation.

Wealthy urbanites flooded this area after September 11, 2001, and now, in their terror of disease and death, they have bought every house they could find. Their cash-filled pockets overflow with blood-money and few ask why. To suggest that massive wealth is almost always ill-begotten is anathema. But innocence wears many masks, and the Show demands washed hands and no questions asked.

It is rare that one becomes super-wealthy in an honest and ethical way. The ways the rich get money almost without exception lead downward, to paraphrase Thoreau from his essay,

“Life Without Principle.”

Since the corona crisis began, investment firms such as the Blackstone Group have been gobbling up vast numbers of houses across the United States as their prices have gone through the roof. The lockdowns – an appropriate prison term – have set millions of regular people back on their heels as the wealthiest have gotten exponentially wealthier. Poverty and starvation have increased around the world. This is not an accident. Despair and depression are widespread.

There is a taboo in life in general and in journalism: Do not ask where people’s money comes from. Thoreau was so advised long ago:

Do not ask how your bread is buttered; it will make you sick...

But the super-wealthy do not get sick. They are sick. For they revel in their depravity and push it in the faces of regular people, many who envy them and wish to become super-rich and powerful themselves. Of course there are the blue bloods whose method is understatement, but it takes many decades to enter their theater of deception. In many ways, these people are worse, for their personae have been crafted over decades of play-acting and public relations so their images are laundered to smell fresh and benevolent. They often wear the mask of philanthropy, while the history of their wealth lies shrouded in an amnestic fog.

Yet soul murder includes suicide, and while the old and new moneyed ones smoothly justify their oppression of the vast majority, many regular people kill the best in themselves by envying the rich.

Years ago, I discovered some documents that showed that one of this country’s most famous philosophers, known for his lofty moral pronouncements, owned a lot of stock in companies that were doing evil things – war making, poisoning and killings

huge numbers with chemicals, etc. But his image was one of Mr. Clean, Mr. Good Guy. I suspect this is typical and that there are many such secrets in the basements and attics of the rich.

But let us also ask where the writers and presenters of the mainstream and alternative media get their money. Although “to follow the money” is a truism, few do. If we do, we will learn that money talks and those who take it toe the line, nor do they live in shacks by the side of the road or rent like so many others. They invest with Black Rock and their ilk and have money managers who can increase their wealth while shielding them from the ways that money is made on the backs of the poor and working people. And they lie about people like Assange, Daniel Hale, Reality Winner, Craig Murray, et al., all imprisoned for daring to reveal the depredations of the power elites, the violence at the heart of predatory capitalism.

Yes, houses speak. But few ever speak of where their money comes from. Those that are on the take – which has multiple meanings – always plead innocent. Yes, I can hear you say that I am being too harsh; that there are exceptions. That is obvious. So let’s skip the exceptions and focus on the general principle. There is a Buddhist principle that right livelihood is a core ethic in earning money. Jesus had another way of putting it but was of course in agreement, as were so many others whom people hold in highest esteem.

Thoreau wrote: “If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications.”

The truth is that for most people, work, if they can find it, is drudgery and hard, a matter of survival. The late great Studs Terkel called it hell and rightly said that most jobs are not big enough for people because they crush the soul, they lack meaning. And behind all ledgers of great wealth lie crushed souls. This reality is so obvious and goes by many

names, including class warfare, that further commentary would be redundant.

A few years ago, I visited Mark Twain's house in Hartford, Connecticut. It is advertised as "a house with a heart and a soul." It is not a house but a mansion, and it was an ostentatious display in Twain's time. Similar or worse than Obama's mansion on Martha's Vineyard today. It has no soul or heart. It was built with Twain's wife's family money. Her father was an oil and coal tycoon from upstate New York. Twain reveled in opulent respectability. He lived the life of a Gilded Age tycoon, an American magnate. It is not a pretty story, but the Twain myth says otherwise. Not that he catered to popular tastes to please the crowd and his domineering wife and that he lived in luxury, but that he was a radical critic of the establishment. This is false. For he withheld for the most part the publication of his withering take on American imperialism until after his death. He committed soul murder. But his mansion impressed his neighbors and his humor distracted from his luxurious lifestyle. His house still stands as a cautionary tale for those who will read it.

Baudelaire once said that in palaces "there is no place for intimacy." This is no doubt why in people's dreams small, simple houses with a light in the window loom large. Bachelard says, "When we are lost in darkness and see a distant glimmer of light, who does not dream of a thatched cottage or, to go more deeply still into legend, of a hermit's hut." For here man and God meet in solitude; here human intimacy is possible. "The hut can receive none of the riches 'of this world.' It possesses the felicity of intense poverty; indeed, it is one of the glories of poverty; as destitution increases, it gives access to absolute refuge."

He is not espousing actual poverty, but the oneiric depths of true desire, the dreams of hope, reconciliation, and simple living that run counter to the amassing of wealth to prove one's power and majesty. A humble house of truth, not a

mansion of lies. This, to borrow the title of William Goyen's novel, is "the house of breath" where the spirit can live and pseudo-stability gives way to faith, for insecurity is the essence of life.

There is such a hermit's hut where the light shines. It is the tiny cell in Belmarsh Prison where Julian Assange hangs onto his life by a thread. His witness for truth sends an inspiring message to all those lost in the world's woods to look to his fate and not turn away. To follow to their sources the money that greases the palms of all the so-called journalists and politicians who want him dead or imprisoned for life, who tell their endless lies, not just about him, but about everything.

The house of propaganda is built on unanimity. When one person says no, the foundation starts to crumble. The houses of the rich dead and crooked souls, erected to project the stability of their bloody illusions, start to crumble into sand when people dissent one by one.

Soon the fog lifts and there is no hiding any more. At the end of the path, you can see the vultures circling overhead as their prey go running out of their mansions in terror.

Sing Hallelujah!

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