



O que é
felicidade
(Corcovado,
Kalamazoo)

*Backfiring, shall
we call this?*

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First bursts. Sue Ellen Christian, one of *Zeteo*'s long-time contributors, e-mailed us a draft response to one of the random, crazed shootings with which the United States is now plagued. As has been reported, several residents of her town, Kalamazoo, Michigan, were

allegedly gunned down by an Uber driver. Random victims, and thus also reminders of how we are all random victims or the random fortunate (and some combination of the two). For example, thanks to our parentage and early childhoods, some of us have ended up relatively comfortable and others in distress. And the comfortable (or the simply rich) live longer and in better physical health. In the United States, we live almost 15 years longer than the distressed (poor). Here is a kind of random “shooting” which overwhelms our imaginations and the statistics for Americans killed in random shootings or by terrorists. By my calculation, *every year* the poorest 10 percent of US citizens lose 6 million years of life because

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of their poverty, how it cuts them down in what otherwise might still be the prime of their lives.

More exhaust. I read a “supplemental statement” issued by two of the Commissioners of the 1915 Committee on Industrial Relations, which was formed in the wake of leftwing, anti-corporate violence. With this statement, the Commissioners John Brown Lennon (of the AFL-CIO) and James O’Connell (of the AFL), urged the strengthening of trade unions.

Where (labor) organization is lacking, dangerous discontent is found on every hand; low wages and long hours prevail; exploitation in every direction is practiced; the people become sullen, have no regard for law and government, and are, in reality, a latent volcano, as dangerous to society as are the volcanoes of nature to the landscape surrounding them.

A reminder, or suggestion, that the current wave of violence by severely alienated people may be directly linked to the more generalized alienation in the United States and throughout the world, and this as a result of: the increasing dominance of a few wealthy people and large corporations; the stranglehold in which global capitalism holds each and every one of us (the capitalists included, by the way); and the disorganization of the working class. Restoring some more “power to the people”—and also a possibility of pursuing alternative lives, of thriving in counter-cultures—these might be roads toward greater peace.

I read how, in their infinite goodness, high-tech philanthropists want to make sure that all the world’s citizens have access to the Internet. An echo of ongoing efforts to make sure that even the poorest countries have modern highways, and particularly between their wells and mines and the nearest port. I, in my tremulous goodness, say, Can we not leave some people (and some natural resources) alone?

Hardly have I typed these words than my eyes are caught by a *New Yorker* illustration and its caption: “Much of the world has no access to paved roads. Vast cargo-bearing airships could reach places that planes and trucks can’t.” From there it’s a short skip and a hop to the article’s utopia, or to that of one of its sources, Lockheed program manager Bob Boyd:

“[M]ore than two-thirds of the world’s land area and more than half the world’s population has no direct access to paved roads.” Modern airships could take off and land with the precision of helicopters and deliver entire warehouses, drilling rigs, or fully stocked factories. Today’s airship designers share a vision: magnificent amounts of trucking going on in the sky—regular convoys of enormous airships carrying timber, coal, wind turbines, prefabricated homes, or an entire summer harvest, pattering gently along at about a hundred miles an hour, ten thousand feet over our heads.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes. . . .

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought

Among her intriguing observations, Sue Ellen wrote that, quickly after the shooting, life in her town had resumed its daily ways. Kalamazoo is an inland, river city, but her e-mail found me in a little town on a coast of the Pacific (an ironically named body of water). At high tide, in the middle of the night, the waves pounding on volcanic rock made a metallic racket, and then subsided. On the Atlantic Coast, where I was raised, I have been able to find a pattern in the waves, but, in the early morning hours, the Pacific, noisy as could be, seemed to deny the idea of music, of harmonies or rhythms. Nature climbs on top of nature, exhausts itself, and then resumes the fight.

Another *Zeteo* contributor sent a piece that quoted from Stuart Hall (1932–2014), the Jamaican-born cultural theorist, one of the founders of the *New Left Review* in England. In a discussion of identity, he proposed “that there is a kind of stable, only very slowly-changing ground inside the hectic upsets, discontinuities and ruptures of history. Around us history is constantly breaking in unpredictable ways but we, somehow, go on being the same.”

“**Drink’s?**” In my son and my Pacific hideout, “south of the border,” there is an outdoor restaurant that advertises for customers with such a sign (Drink’s?). The seemingly possessive apostrophe included and was doubly called into question by the question mark. I have proposed to my fascinated son that this could be the first Zen koan of his still young life. 逢佛殺佛 — Every Buddha kill Buddha. (Commonly re-interpreted: If you meet the Buddha, kill him.)

I do not know why Uber chose to do business under this German word—über, over, “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles.” A reminder of an old Tom Lehrer joke: “We taught them a lesson in 1918, and they’ve hardly bothered us since then.”

Sue Ellen alerted me to the number 4.73. This is the average customer-satisfaction rating given by the murderous driver’s previous Uber customers. (On a scale of 1-5, 5 being best.)

One of Sue Ellen’s conundrums was a shared conundrum. How to react to these shootings when politicians are more than prepared to express their sorrow and outrage and then do little or nothing to reduce the possibility of similar events occurring in the days and years ahead?

I noted that the First World War has long been the poster child for senseless killing, and that one of the most inspired responses to that event was the Dada movement, with its

rejection of the “reason” and “logic” of bourgeois capitalist society, which had led to the deaths of 17 million people, 4 percent of the populations of Germany and France and, say, 17 percent of the population of Romania, 25 percent of the population of Serbia.

Setting aside for a moment the Civil War, the eradication of the Indians, the unceasing violence against African Americans, the more than 1 million people killed in the course of the Vietnam War, etc., can we say that “we”—or some “we”—have led charmed lives here in the United States? Thank God we have, as Thomas Jefferson proposed, left behind the countries of Europe where “ignorance, superstition, poverty, and oppression of body and mind, in every form, are so firmly settled on the mass of the people”.

A few lines from the Dada leader Tristan Tzara (a Romanian):

Faut-il ne plus croire aux mots ? Depuis quand expriment-ils le contraire de ce que l'organe qui les émet, pense et veut ? (Must we no longer believe in words? Since when have they been expressing the opposite of what the organ that emits them thinks and wants?)

Plus d'ivrognes! Plus de blennorrhagies! Plus de vigueur! Plus de voies urinaires! Plus d'enigmes! (No more drunkards! No more sexual diseases! No more vigor! No more urinary passages! No more enigmas!)

Je maintiens toutes les conventions – les supprimer serait en faire de nouvelles, ce qui nous compliquerait la vie d'une manière vraiment répugnante. (I support all the conventions—to suppress them would be to make new ones, which would complicate our lives in a truly repugnant fashion.)

Non-productive work. I have heard of a vast organization where, for bookkeeping purposes, employees' hours are classified either as “productive work” or “non-productive work.” The latter category includes such things as days spent in training, hours at staff meetings. Of course it is possible to think that most all the employees of this organization, as of many another, are largely engaged in non-productive work. Or, alternatively, as regards most (though hardly all) work these days, it is possible to see non-productive laborers and executives as making a larger (if zero) contribution than the certifiably productive laborers and executives.

There is a way to think of my own life as having been dominated by non-productive work. I have in mind, however, a particular task, to date more contemplated than undertaken. The task is to translate (or to work on new translations of) bossa nova hits, transforming the Portuguese into English. An engrossingly non-productive feature of this task: its near impossibility. That is, if one simply translates the words, the songs fall apart, becoming as mindless as the many mindless songs of American and British pop music. “We

can just be friends / No more fooling around / Former lovers, not current ones.” (“Chuvas de Verão,” Summer Rains)

Must we no longer believe in words? Our north-of-a-border appreciation of the songs may depend on our inability to understand the lyrics. Certainly it has a lot to do with the sounds and rhythms of the words in Portuguese and in accord with the sounds and rhythms of the music.

O que é felicidade? On March 4, 2016, I found myself in an East Village, New York café where the mix tape or Pandora was playing light-jazz versions of bossa nova hits. This inspired me to return to my task, and, in particular, to one of my favorite bossa nova songs, “Corcovado.” American pop stars—Andy Williams and Frank Sinatra—made the tune into a US hit (“Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars”), using English lyrics which we might call secular humanist, de-localized, and pie-in-the-sky. That is, the American song is a straightforward love song, concluding:

I who was lost and lonely believing love was only
A bitter tragic joke, have found with you, the meaning of existence, oh my
love.

The standard English equivalent for the Portuguese word *corcova* is “hump.” By extension, *Corcovado* refers to a rather prominent, more than 2,000-feet-high, granite hump in the middle of Rio de Janeiro. On its peak is a tall, but small compared to the rock, statue of Jesus, which is entitled *Cristo Redentor* (Christ the Redeemer). Legend has it that the songwriter, Antônio Carlos Jobim, was living in an apartment far below. From his kitchen window he could see the peak and statue.

Which brings this piece quite close to its closing citation: the concluding lines of Jobim’s song. Before their reproduction—with a simple, unrhyming translation—three notes:

- Igor Pasternak, one of the promoters of the aforementioned cargo-bearing airships, has in mind that he is “selling a dream, . . . a promise. You can call this gambling, or vision, or belief—whatever. Or knowledge. But, in reality, it’s contributing. I mean, we’re all asking the same question: what the hell we’re doing here. Right?”
- In the Portuguese version of “Corcovado,” it is not so clear the singer’s lover is another person. I would propose that she/he/it is many things—in addition to a specific person. *Meu amor* (my love) is also a rock, a religion (likely viewed with a certain irony), a city, an apartment, a home, a life.
- In recorded versions of the song (in Portuguese), and in the bossa nova tradition, the concluding line is hardly ecstatic; it is quietly stated. And in versions of the lyrics found on line, the last line comes without question marks. Are they unneeded because we add them subconsciously? This is our question: O que é felicidade?

We like to think that our questions are *how* questions—how to find the right solution to violence, to cargo, to the powers of nature, to how our language keeps coming up short? And thus we keep beating ourselves into volcanic rock. I would not ignore how getting involved in big questions can be a way putting distance between oneself and others' suffering and desires. It can be a way of ignoring how these others, animate and inanimate, might, in simple ways, be helped. But it is equally true that philosophers have long found solace in, and helped others find solace in, shifting from “how” to “what”—recognizing and accepting the unanswerability of our most fundamental questions.

Descrente deste mundo
Ao encontrar você eu conheci
O que é felicidade meu amor
O que é felicidade, o que é felicidade

Skeptical, without belief, in this world
Finding you I came to know
What is happiness, my love
What is happiness, what is happiness

Credits & References

Click for [Sue Ellen Christian's Zeteo](#) pieces.

Sabrina Tavernise, [Disparity in Life-spans of the Rich and the Poor is Growing](#), *New York Times*, February 13, 2016.

Full text of [Industrial relations: final report and testimony submitted to Congress by the Commission on Industrial Relations created by the act of August 23, 1912](#).

Jeanne Marie-Laskas, [Helium Dreams](#), *The New Yorker*, 29 February 2016.

Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities.” In *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, edited by Anthony D. King (University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

“After great pain, a formal feeling comes,” Emily Dickinson.

Koan about killing the Buddha is from Linji Yixuan (died 866 CE), the founder of the Linji school of Chan Buddhism in China. (Chan in Japan is Zen.)

“Deutschland, Deutschland über alles” is a line from the beginning and refrain of the first stanza of “Deutschlandlied” (Song of Germany, also known as “Das Lied der Deutschen” or The Song of the Germans). The line “Germany, Germany above all” refers to the goal of nineteenth-century German liberals: for a unified Germany. The music was written by Austrian composer Joseph Haydn in 1797 as an anthem for the birthday of Francis II, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and later of Austria. In 1841, the German linguist and

poet August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben wrote the lyrics of “Das Lied der Deutschen” to Haydn’s melody. At present, for political reasons, the German national anthem does not include this first stanza.

Tom Lehrer, from his song [The MLF Lullaby](#).

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to George Wythe, 13 August 1786, Paris, August 13, 1786.

Tristan Tzara, “Programme de la matinée du mouvement dada le 5 février 1920,” facsimile reproduced in [Dada, Number 6, February 1920](#), Blue Mountain Project, Historic Avant-Garde Periodicals for Digital Research.

Tristan Tzara, [Dada manifeste sur l’amour faible et l’amour amer](#), first read at the Povolozky gallery in Paris, December 9, 1920. Subsequently published in *La Vie des lettres*, n°4, 1921.

Click for the [Literary Explorer](#) website (hosts: Thomas E. Kennedy and Walter Cummins).

One version of [Corcovado](#), sung by João Gilberto. May I thank the musician [Eleanor Dubinsky](#) and her accompanying guitarists, who, singing and playing in New York, reminded me of what a beautiful song this is.