



Peter Mark Roget

to suspect the good doctor of megalomania—though the truth is more nearly that he was just doing what well-educated men of the time did. Over the years, Roget developed a new laboratory test for arsenic poisoning; published a mathematical paper on the slide rule, inventing the log-log scale, “the centerpiece of the modern slide rule”; discovered that “the retina typically sees a series of still images as a continuous picture,” thereby laying the theoretical groundwork for movies; and, as the capstone on a successful career as an academic physiologist (though some accused him of plagiarism and playing favorites), published a 250,000-word treatise on animal and vegetable physiology that earned him renown in America for the first time. Not until he was 73 did he get around to publishing his thesaurus, and he edited new editions of it until his death 17 years later, in 1869. This retirement project of his has gone on to sell nearly 40 million copies.

Roget traveled in interesting circles. As a young man, he worked for the jurist and philosopher Jeremy Bentham and the chemist Humphry Davy. He crossed paths with Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, Madame de Staël, and Erasmus Darwin, Charles’s grandfather, who not only translated Linnaeus but set him to verse. He met William Franklin, Ben’s son, and chatted with

him about kites and electricity. He helped to organize a book club that Isaac D’Israeli, Benjamin Disraeli’s father, was invited to join.

Obsessiveness, anxiety, and depression can shadow even the sunniest of lives, but into Roget’s life much rain did fall. He was four when his father died, more or less permanently unhinging his mother. Over the years, he watched his mother and daughter go mad and his sister battle chronic depression, and he had much to reproach himself for when his beloved uncle, Sir Samuel Romilly, committed suicide by slitting his throat with a razor. Cancer robbed him of his wife after less than 10 years of marriage. Kendall emphasizes—even harps on—Roget’s MO of using intellectual activity to cope with emotional problems and tragedy.

As befits a book about a man who strove to help us find exactly the words we want, *The Man Who Made Lists* is for the most part elegantly written. Occasionally, though, Kendall’s brain goes on autopilot, with results such as “the entire city was then down in the dumps” and “By August, Peter’s recovery was in full swing.” And I would have preferred if Kendall had either used his imagination less or told us where he got scene details such as “After saying a quick goodbye to his mother . . .” and “Roget’s jaw dropped.” But these are cavils/quibbles/trivial objections, to quote from the illegitimate offspring of *Roget’s* that resides on my computer. All in all, *The Man Who Made Lists* is an absorbing account of a remarkable man.

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Net Gains

Reviewed by David Robinson

TWO YEARS AGO, CULTURAL critic Lee Siegel found himself thrust by his editors at *The New Republic* into the rough-and-tumble world of blogs, where anonymous readers could (and did) level harsh attacks against his every word. He rightly saw these

AGAINST THE MACHINE:

Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob.

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attacks as a form of thuggery, though the remedy on which he settled—assuming an alias to join the exchange in his own defense—was as bad as the disease. Eventually, he was found out. He lost his blog but gained a book contract, and *Against the Machine* is the result.

Siegel's thesis is that blogs, YouTube, Wikipedia, and other recent upsurges of so-called user-generated content are culturally harmful. Those who think otherwise he dismisses as "Internet boosters" who respond to skepticism about this new smorgasbord by "crying 'free speech' and 'democracy' and 'don't fight the future.'" Many advocates of the Internet are, of course, more thoughtful than Siegel's straw men—and in neglecting to engage them, he shows that the uncharitable style of online argument he decries is no more appealing in print.

Nonetheless, Siegel has acute questions about the role that commerce plays in Internet culture. Others have cited the emergence of free resources such as the volunteer-written Wikipedia and open-source software as evidence that the Internet shrinks the domain of commerce, but Siegel says that's only half the story. These new projects encourage people to see economic value in their leisure pursuits. Those who post videos of themselves on YouTube, for example, regard attention itself as a valuable commodity; to them, "doing their thing and doing business in the marketplace are the very same activity."

In Siegel's eyes, this phenomenon owes something to books such as Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* (2000), which argue that life "is wholly driven by commercial concerns." He blames Gladwell's book for creating the trend that it merely describes, namely, "populariz[ing] the idea of popularity as the sole criterion of success. Once the 'tipping point' became an established concept, the easy hijacking of the Internet by commercial interests was almost a foregone conclusion."

It's debatable how far this trend has extended—do online popularity hounds really think they are "doing business" in a "marketplace"?—but Siegel is right that we have traveled some distance down the road of conflating usefulness with intrinsic value.

The mindset that makes the most sense online, in other words, may threaten "our freedom to live apart from other people's uses for us, and from ours for other people."

But if economics has been stretched to cover notions such as popularity and pleasure, and love, then economic terms are no longer purely pecuniary. Siegel fears that we may come to view love as an act of commerce, but when the two are blended, perhaps we will recognize commerce itself as more humane. The social goods that can be found in markets—the nobility of self-reliance, the creativity and freedom inherent in launching a new venture, the solid fairness of an even exchange—seem to strike Siegel as bastardized virtues, because commerce itself is morally suspect. Then again, perhaps the isolation of commerce as a neatly separate sphere of human activity—an isolation whose end this book laments—will turn out to be something we are just as well off without.

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Art and Statecraft

Reviewed by Christopher Merrill

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN literature and politics is necessarily fraught. This is especially true for writers engaged in matters of state. If writers try to articulate questions central to the human condition, diplomats must provide answers. The responsibilities of these vocations almost inevitably conflict, for the writer's commitment to truth may test the diplomat's instructions. But a precious few have managed to excel in both spheres. The tradition of literary diplomats reached its zenith in the early 1960s, when three Nobel Prizes for Literature were awarded to writers who had also served as diplomats—Saint-John Perse of France, Ivo Andric of Yugoslavia, and George Seferis of Greece.

War is the ultimate test of diplomatic skills and literary vision. And World War II, which for politi-

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