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Steve Jobs and Disclaimed Paternity

He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune; for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief.—Bacon

Fyodor Karamazov, the libertine patriarch of the Dostoevsky novel, abandons the care of his first child “not from malice, nor because of his matrimonial grievances, but simply because he forgot him.” As if making a policy of negligence, he proceeds to forget his other children one by one, denies fathering one of them, and vows they will see none of his wealth. Steve Jobs, the revered techno-visionary and co-founder of Apple, ignored his first child until sued by San Mateo County for failing to support her, whereupon he falsely deposed that he could not have been the father because he was sterile. When a DNA test proved to a near certainty that he was in fact the father, he made sure an order setting a child-support payment of \$385 per month was in place days before Apple went public and he became fantastically wealthy at the age of twenty-five: a stunt worthy of Fyodor Karamazov himself. When she was nine, Jobs swore to the child, “You’re not getting anything. You understand? Nothing. You’re getting nothing.”

The child’s name was Lisa. During her early years, while her mother cleaned houses and waited tables, Jobs introduced a computer named the Lisa, which was eventually upstaged by

the Macintosh, which became an instant classic. He later said that at the age of 22, “I knew I wasn’t ready to run a real company. But Apple was my baby, and I didn’t want to give it up.” The actual baby born when he was 23 was another matter. Even as he envisioned and dictated the production of things the world had never seen, Jobs reproduced in his own way the sorry tradition of fathers deserting their children.

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Adopted by loving parents shortly after his birth in 1955, Steve Jobs came of age in the latter days of the uprising against the existing order that broke out in the 1960s, and identified himself then and forever with the counterculture that fueled this comprehensive revolt. Though the uprising wasn’t launched in the name of, or governed by, a set of principles (its freedom from norms or limits of any kind was at the heart of its self-understanding), it did have themes, some of which bear on the construction of the Lisa. For one, the very word “technology” evoked in the mind of the counterculture a cold, impersonal and very possibly inhuman force. The establishment challenged by the rebels was nicknamed “the system,” as if it were a technology in its own right. And yet some of the hackers, tinkerers, engineers and visionaries, including Steve Jobs, who clustered around what is now Silicon Valley began to see in the computer itself an augury of human liberation.

No less brilliant than Jobs but without his charisma, Steve Wozniak thought up the personal computer, that is, a computer that sat atop a desk, in 1975. While Jobs became legendary for accomplishing the seemingly impossible, perhaps the first and foremost of

impossibilities was making a force as potentially alien as a computer seem personal at all. In the spirit of the counterculture, a PC would tame the hostility of technology and return it to its rightful status as the servant of humanity. Intended to advance the state of the art of personal computing, the Lisa bore the very name of a person, becoming as it were a warm and friendly being. (IBM soon adopted a like strategy of endearment, attaching the image of a Charlie Chaplin tramp to its new PC.)

Well might the audacious project of building this demi-human have eclipsed in Steve Jobs' mind the child it was named for. Yet even after Jobs officially recognized his daughter by allowing her to take his surname, he denied to her that he *had* named the Lisa for her, as if granting the connection would concede her priority or in some way limit his freedom. If the counterculture wouldn't be pinned down to a set of principles, Jobs refused to be tied down to paternity. And though the Lisa lost out to the Macintosh—now the Mac—that too gave off a countercultural signal: before it became the name of Jobs' company, Apple was a Beatles label. Jobs' Apple was sued by the Beatles' Apple for copyright infringement in 1978, the year of Lisa's birth.

While some thought Jobs named his brainchild the Lisa out of guilt, self-recrimination wasn't like him, and it's clear, in any case, that his heart wasn't with the human Lisa just then. A wild child himself who bawled, raged, indulged in primal-scream therapy, defied the proprieties, and late in life even tried to rid himself of cancer by releasing negative emotions, Jobs was in full accord with the countercultural revolt against repression in all its forms; and strongly implied in this revolt was a repudiation of guilt, now understood as repression's enforcement mechanism. (Assuming he had the patience for it, Jobs could have read in *Your*

Erroneous Zones [1976], “If you have large worry and guilt zones, they must be exterminated, spray-cleaned and sterilized forever.”) Possessed with a sense of mission and not at all ridden with guilt over imposing his vision on Apple by ruthless force of personality, Jobs evidently believed he was on this earth to do a lot more than raise a child during the years when he disregarded her existence. Besides, how could the nauseating sense of being deeply at fault persist in one whose decisions and decrees were continually proved right by the very engineers who at first thought them impossible?

Not until he was on his deathbed did Jobs express remorse to Lisa Brennan-Jobs, and perhaps not until then did he suffer it, either.

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Presumably, most fathers who desert do so because they resent the obligations of paternity. They do not purport to serve any cause or principle higher than their own dislikes.

The extreme of the father who disclaims paternity because it doesn’t suit him is Fyodor Karamazov—extreme both in that he ignores his sons one after another, as a matter of settled policy, and in that he doesn’t care to hide his total dereliction of duty and devotion to his own lust. He deserts his children without even bothering to leave them. In life, of course, the deserter ordinarily departs. Candidate Obama, for whom Jobs offered to make ads, censured the father who disappeared from his household. The father of John Lennon—one of Jobs’ heroes—went AWOL both from the Navy and from paternity itself; “Father, you left me but I never left you,” sang the son. In some settings paternal desertion seems virtually taken for

granted. The British psychiatrist Theodore Dalrymple reports with horror that he has had “hundreds of conversations with men who have abandoned their children,” the numbers alone suggesting a practice that has lost even the character of being unusual. With desertion so commonplace that it no longer attracts notice, disappearance comes easily: you just melt into the background. The father to whom Steve Jobs was born performed a vanishing act of his own; as Lisa Brennan-Jobs states with great simplicity in her recently published memoir, her aunt (Jobs’ biological sister) “had also grown up with a single mother, after her father left.”

At once rebel and ruler, the young Jobs was strongly drawn to the tradition of child desertion; he wasn’t about to submit to the restrictions of liberty imposed by paternity. “I was all in favor of her getting an abortion,” he later said, referring to his child’s mother, Chrisann Brennan. After she had the child, “He didn’t want to have anything to do with her or me,” reports the mother; the child didn’t lay eyes on him till she was three. While this policy of shunning seems an implicit way of disowning his child, the disappearance available to others who default on paternity and exit by the back door wasn’t really possible for Jobs, who was even then in hot pursuit of fame and fortune, moved by the spirit of great enterprises.

Even as he refused paternity during Lisa’s early years, Jobs envisioned himself an architect of the future whose work overruled the norms binding, perhaps, on lesser folk. That he thought of himself as an idealist and not a libertine may have made it easier for him to act, at times, like a libertine; his commitment to radical innovation, pure design and deep simplicity absolved him from more earthly obligations. Growing up, his daughter caught on to her insignificance in his scheme of things. “Instead of raising me, he was inventing world-changing machines. . . . I figured no one would think, *Hey, that guy should have been raising his daughter*

instead. What presumption.” Later, when she no longer took his scheme of things as her own, she realized that she represented in Jobs’ eyes a detail incompatible with his own myth of transcendence—“a blot on a spectacular ascent,” as she puts it.

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While the father who contrives to disappear or merely pretends not to have a child would seem to forfeit the right to appeal to any higher principle, that doesn’t mean no such principles exist. An ideal high enough may not only justify but even call for the renunciation of children. “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, *and children*, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” The childless ideal antedates Christianity, however.

The guardians of Plato’s republic are childless not in the sense that they don’t beget children, but in that they surrender their offspring to the state and are even kept in ignorance of their existence. “The wives of our guardians are to be common, and their children are to be common, and no parent is to know his own child, nor any child his parents.” The most provocative feature of the myth of the Republic, communal marriage, may be a device for ensuring that guardians remain uncorrupted by private attachments. Not living in private houses or possessing children of their own, they “will be delivered from all those quarrels of which money or children or relations are the occasion.” Children born to the guardians will be told, for their part, that they have sprung from the earth.

Though the Platonic ideal of children severed from their parents in the interest of preserving the purity of all parties is too fantastic to be put into practice, it did inspire a sort of imitation in one instance. The paragon of the tradition of child desertion is Rousseau, who deposited each of his (and Thérèse's) five children, one by one, at the local orphanage on the theory that he was thus ensuring their virtue in the Platonic manner. "In handing my children over for the State to educate, for lack of means to bring them up myself, by destining them to become workers and peasants instead of adventurers and fortune-hunters, I thought I was acting as a citizen and a father, and looked upon myself as a member of Plato's Republic." (Rousseau's ideal order in which everyone performs a distinct function, rather than confusing and undermining distinctions like a social climber, accords with the Platonic republic where "the carpenter confines himself to carpentering, the shoemaker to making shoes," in the words of Karl Popper.) Looking back on his actions, Rousseau seems half-unconvinced by his exalted justification of them. In showing the world how he contrived to think of the abandonment of infants as an exemplary act of paternal responsibility, he indeed offers a stunning lesson in self-delusion.

With his proudly uncouth behavior, his disdain of the inauthentic East Coast, his tearful outbursts, his fanatically simple diets, Jobs acted like a Rousseau, and he was all the more a Rousseau if he persuaded himself (as Lisa Brennan-Jobs maintains in interviews but not in her memoir) that by leaving his firstborn in poverty he was encouraging her independence and teaching her that money corrupts. Independence and corruption are the North and South of Rousseau's thought. By surrendering his newborns to the orphanage, Rousseau was able to put them out of his mind once and for all and resume life with Thérèse. With Jobs the disregard

took effect before the child was born. Writes his biographer Walter Isaacson, “When Jobs did not want to deal with a distraction, he sometimes just ignored it, as if he could will it out of existence. At times he was able to distort reality not just for others but even for himself. In the case of Brennan’s pregnancy, he simply shut it out of his mind.” When Jobs ignored the child Lisa in favor of the machine by the same name, he merely continued the habit of disregard that had been established before she arrived. In order to deny her existence, it seems, he didn’t need to imagine her into a better world like Rousseau. He just needed to re-invent the world at hand.

Over time, the imagining and construction of a better world became the writ of the intellectual, compared to which his own family is a minor matter—a pebble in his shoe. In an essay on Orwell, Lionel Trilling called attention both to the man’s disaffection with the intelligentsia and to many an intellectual’s peculiar estrangement from the world of circumstance, family circumstance in particular. “The characteristic error of the middle-class intellectual of modern times,” wrote Trilling, “is his tendency to abstractness and absoluteness, his reluctance to connect idea with fact, especially with personal fact. . . . The prototypical act of the modern intellectual is his abstracting himself from the life of the family.” Abstraction, it seems, removes the intellect from the petty concerns and attached strings of domestic life. (“Abstractness and absoluteness” happens to describe perfectly the rigorous purity of design that Jobs loved. The irreducibly simple Apple logo itself proclaims these qualities.) Orwell in turn defended the life of preferential attachments, such as that of a parent to a child. “To an ordinary human being, love means nothing if it does not mean loving some people more than others,” he wrote in a comment on Gandhi. It’s in part because Gandhi specifically refused to

show partiality for his own wife and children that Orwell—who adopted a son, Richard Horatio Blair—considered him a model not to be followed despite his great virtues. (One of Jobs’ engineers reports that he deemed himself a superior being “like Gandhi.”)

Orwell’s critique of the intelligentsia was directed first and foremost at apologists for Stalin whose loyalty to commanding abstractions like the Working Class or Socialism precluded the sort of faithful attention to prosaic realities registered in everything Orwell wrote. Trilling’s reflection on Orwell first appeared as an introduction to an edition of *Homage to Catalonia* published in 1952, when the gaze of the world Left was fixed on the affair of the Rosenbergs, who at that point had been tried for espionage, convicted, and sentenced to death but not yet executed. The story goes that when Ethel Rosenberg refused clemency, preferring execution to cooperation with the U. S. Justice Department, she was asked how she could leave her children orphans. “Lots of children are orphans,” she replied. In other words, So what? Devotion to the working class, the Soviet Union, etc. far transcends the claims of one’s own kin; and perhaps the attachment to one’s own detracts from the love of humanity. While Steve Jobs did not serve an idol that demanded human sacrifice, his actions following the birth of his first child said all too clearly, in a variation on Ethel Rosenberg’s dismissal of her children, “So what if I don’t play the father? Lots of people are fathers, but how many can father a computer?”

Not only did Jobs author a machine, however. At a time when his fledgling company was forming its conception of itself and branding itself in the marketplace, he began to say that Apple was inventing *the future*—an undertaking as grandiose as building socialism, minus the class warfare. Next to the project of remaking the very pattern of human life, the neglect of a child is as nothing. Isaacson indeed concludes that Jobs was able to change the world precisely

because he believed that “ordinary rules do not apply to him,” with the implication that if he had honored a norm like responsibility he would have lost his magic. It’s as if he suffered from a rare condition by which norms become fetters—tyrannies.

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An image forever associated with Apple shows the face of tyranny obliterated in an act of defiance.

The Macintosh was launched in January of the Orwellian year 1984, its advent announced by a sensational ad, aired during the Superbowl, in which a lone heroine hurls a sledgehammer at a projection of Big Brother as he or it addresses a seated army of mindless drones. (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtvjbmoDx-I>) Clad as if for Olympic competition, this Amazon couldn’t have been more unlike IBM’s decorous little tramp; and that was the point. While ad became an immediate classic because it staged so exuberantly the theme of shattered tyranny, it was not directed at any totalitarian system, despite its rhetoric. It was directed at IBM, then with the lion’s share of the market for personal computers. Because there was no force prohibiting or impeding the Macintosh’s entry in the world—no tyranny for it to destroy—the imagery of a great blow struck against Big Brother was all show. It was not just hyperbolic but hype itself, the stuff of Barnum, as befits an ad deemed by many “the greatest commercial of all time.”

In the ad Big Brother is heard to blare, “We are one people, with one will, one resolve, one cause,” as if the mediating institution of the family had been abolished. As it happens, the

young Jobs had a connection to a commune that nominally abolished the family: the All One apple farm where he sought enlightenment, where Lisa Brennan was born, and for which Apple was named. Even then, it seems, Jobs leaned toward an idealism premised upon “abstracting himself from the life of the family.” The affirmation of humanity begins, however, not with Olympian acts of iconoclasm that spring from nowhere, as in the ad, but prosaic acts of loyalty to those who share with us the institution from which we ourselves spring: the family. The flawed protagonist of *1984*, Winston Smith—whose father is said to have “disappeared,” whatever that may mean in context—has some inkling of this principle.

In his eager appropriation of Orwell, Jobs may have missed the importance of the loyalty of parent to child in *1984*. From the outset of the work, Winston Smith struggles to reclaim the concept of familial loyalty—struggles, because the concept is under official assault and his understanding of it is shaky. His first diary entry records a movie scene in which a woman in a lifeboat menaced from above shelters her child as best she can, “as if she thought her arms could keep the bullets off him.” While Winston Smith cannot yet respond to the scene with anything but inhuman enjoyment, he does realize, somewhere in his mind, that the bond of parent to child is sacred to our humanity, and in the midst of his effort to piece together some shreds of the past he dreams of the mother who did not abandon him:

He could not remember what had happened, but he knew in his dream that in some way the lives of his mother and sister had been sacrificed to his own. . . . The thing that now suddenly struck Winston was that his mother’s death, nearly thirty years ago, had been tragic and sorrowful in a way that was no longer possible. Tragedy, he perceived,

belonged to the ancient time, to a time when there were still privacy, love, and friendship, and when the members of a family stood by one another without needing to know the reason.

If Orwell judged the modern intellectual reluctant “to connect idea . . . with personal fact” (as Trilling observes), Winston Smith now begins to do just that. If Steve Jobs believed inventing the future took precedence over loyalty to his child, he would have done well to read the work pirated by the greatest commercial of all time.

Jobs’ biographer discerns in him “a complex form of dissembling” by which he convinced himself of untruths and thereby convinced others, a maneuver we could call doublethink after the mental trickery that allows the citizens of Oceania to fool themselves and swallow official contradictions whole. Doublethink as practiced in Oceania merely exaggerates the human capacity for self-deception. Almost immediately after being told that Fyodor Karamazov forgot his child, we learn that “he could not have been altogether unaware of his existence,” quite as if he had mastered the subtleties of doublethink for himself, without political instruction. Jobs, similarly, had the ability to shut out his child even after he recognized her existence. Many of his Apple acquaintances would comment specifically on his practice of reality control (seemingly unaware of its Orwellian resonances), and his dealings with Lisa were highly subject to this capricious principle. Eventually he admitted her into his household in the same imperial manner in which he had once ignored her, requiring her not to see her mother for six months. Even after she became Lisa Brennan-Jobs—with the same lawyer who represented Jobs when he denied paternity now seeing to her change of name—he continued to display flashes of

cruelty, finally cutting off communication with her for ten full years. Long after she bore his name Jobs excluded her from his bio on the Apple website, in effect denying paternity all over again. It seems he never settled into the role he resisted the first decade of her life.

Nor perhaps did he ever repudiate the sort of thinking that allowed him to deny his child's existence to begin with. In his famous graduation address at Stanford University in 2005, Jobs offered the same wisdom that preachers of self-realization have been dispensing for decades. "Don't be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice," he urged. Did he realize that such a sweeping negation of everything normative could license negligence, cruelty and much else, provided only that one considers common decency a custom of *others*? In his dealings with Lisa—first refusing paternity, later taking her in, then freezing her out—Jobs himself acted all too much like one who knows no norm but his own will. As for the hundreds of deserting fathers seen by Theodore Dalrymple, they were united in the "strong belief" not that their actions were innocuous (about that they were under no illusions) but that no third party had a right to judge them, which is as much as to say that the opinions and dogmas of others didn't bind them in any way.

Nevertheless, from the notion that norms are crimes against the self, reinforced by Jobs' conviction that ordinary standards didn't apply to him and by his own record as a rebel, arose the Steve Jobs myth: he defied the rules others live by and accomplished great things, hence he accomplished these things *because* he defied the rules. Appealing both to romantic clichés and countercultural antinomianism, and possessing the gripping simplicity of the 1984 ad, the myth excuses anything Jobs might have done that would otherwise be hard to justify, beginning with

the erasure of his child's existence during her and Apple's early years. In a variant on doublethink, many seem to endorse the Steve Jobs myth without endorsing the deeds authorized by the myth itself.

Ironically, too, Jobs' refusal of paternity may have contributed nothing to his achievements after all. We can't simply assume that because this refusal was heartfelt and coincided with the building of Apple it somehow enabled his work. To buy into the notion that if Jobs had attended to his child's existence he never would have built Apple in the first place is to embrace the ruling fantasy of his child's early years: that "Instead of raising me, he was inventing world-changing machines," as if neglecting her freed Jobs to do something more important. The least one can say about that proposition, which probably reflects Jobs' thinking about his child to the extent that he thought of her at all, is that there's no way to verify it.

Note: My information about Jobs comes mostly from the Walter Isaacson biography, *Steve Jobs* (2011), and Lisa Brennan-Jobs' *Small Fry* (2018). Reportedly, Steve Jobs eventually bequeathed to Lisa Brennan-Jobs the same inheritance as his other children. My thanks to the historian Michael Mayer for information about Ethel Rosenberg.