

Desperate Remedies

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It is often said that the authoritarian leaders who are currently having electoral success across the world are offering a kind of hope to the hopeless, to those who feel left out or left behind by the roaring, rattling jamboree of global capitalism. Let me propose that they are offering something different, something just as affectively precious as hope but politically more potent: what they offering is desperation. Desperation is more potent than hope, because where hope offers something at which to aim, desperation contains an imperative to act. Hoping can relapse into hopeless moping, but desperation brings with it the energy of a radical disinhibition – and a disinhibition, as we will shortly see, that is an essential feature of the libido of extremity in radicalism. Desperation has parted ways interestingly from despair. It is in fact the energy released by the fission of despair.

Well into the nineteenth century, desperate continued to mean, when applied to persons, without hope, and, when applied to an object or condition (as in a medical condition said to be ‘desperate’) offering no grounds for hope and so to be despaired of. But alongside this, starting, I would say, from some point towards the end of the fifteenth century, and following the logic of slow convulsion that curves so many words over on themselves, desperation started to mean something like the opposite of despair. The common association of despair with the devil seems to have been crucial in this positivisation of despair, turning it from plight into purpose. As Lancelot Andrewes writes, in a sermon on the words of Cain ‘My sin is greater than I can bear’ (Gen. 4.13), the devil’s intent is not so much to promote sin, as to dissolve the faith in the possibility of divine forgiveness:

when sinne is finished, and the Devill hath that he would have, then he laboureth to bring men into desperation, saying, it must needs be, and they cannot avoid the wrath and judgements of God. ... when he hath entised men to commit sinne, then he blindeth their eyes, that the light of the Gospell, whereby they are assured of the forgivenessse of sinnes, and of the mercy of God in Christ. ... That which excluded the Devill himself from mercy, was this desperate fear, for as *Augustine* saith, *Obstinatione suâ, & non enormitate sceleris, Daemon est Daemon*: [it is through his obstinacy and not the enormity of his sin that the Devil is the Devil]. (Andrewes 1657, 442)

Desperation is despair in the imperative mood; and so can furnish the antidote to despair. The two kinds of desperation are juggled in the Friar’s intimation to Juliet of ‘a kind of hope,/Which craves as desperate an execution/As that is desperate which we would prevent’ (Shakespeare 2000, 412). Desperate actions began to be actions given an impulsion of a particular vehemence, and to be just as likely to be fixed and focussed as wild and disordered. A newsbill of 1700 excitably described the setting on fire of a house in Bloomsbury: ‘the said Villains, by the Instigation of the Devil, Immediatly fix’d upon this Desperate, Terrible, and Dismal Resolution, viz. to set the House on Fire in several places’ (Anon 1700). ‘Dismal’ has lost its demonic cast in something of the same way as ‘desperate’: deriving from the ‘dies mali’, or unlucky days of the medieval

calendar, 'dismal' was actually an alternative name for the devil; here it does not mean gloomy so much as diabolically determined.

Despair drives one inwards, and away from action, into racked and futile rumination. Desperation by contrast is a promise of the detonating force of action, imperative and not itself to be inhibited. It is not the response to, but the saving threat of emergency, as a literal emergence of will from nothing, or the less than nothing of despair. Despair smears time into a swamp of inconsequence, the Slough of Despond, of which Bunyan writes that it is 'such a place as cannot be mended', for despite very effort to drain and solidify it '*Here* hath been swallowed up, at least, Twenty thousand Cart Loads; yea Millions of wholesom Instructions' (Bunyan 2003, 17). Even though God has provided 'certain good and substantiall steps, placed even through the very midst of this *Slow*' they are undetectable to those slithering in 'this miry *slow*', for 'at such time as this place doth much spue out its filth, as it doth against change of weather, these steps are hardly seen; or if they be, Men through the dizziness of their Heads, step besides, and then they are bemired to purpose, notwithstanding the steps be there' (Bunyan 2003, 17).

Desperation, by contrast, brings time to a point, and revives time as direction and impulsion. The child who needs the loo and implores 'Mummy, I'm desperate' is warning that they are approaching the point when they will cease to care about the consequences. This is why the appeal of the desperate always includes menace and ultimatum.

Peter Sloterdijk sees in the figure of Satan an attempt to explain the presence of evil in a way that ensures it can be entirely unattributable to God. For this, '[e]vil must be grounded epigenetically, so that the inference from it back to the good origin remains impossible' (Sloterdijk 2017, 55). This shifts the burden of responsibility for evil on to human freedom – 'there accrues to the human being as the creature gifted with freedom a literally superhuman, Atlantean task: he is called upon to bear the guilt of an entire world of pain. Human freedom exonerates God from the impertinence of acknowledging a second principle alongside himself as the origin of that which is not intended by him' (Sloterdijk 2017, 56). This extreme culpability, making human freedom the cause not just of particular sins, but of sin's very possibility within a benign Creation, and so making humans guilty of the sin of originating original sin, finds its counterpart in the pure, self-authoring evil of the Devil:

The Augustinian Satan, who represents something like an allegory of negation on a level below the principal, does not resort – this much is certain – to any external motive for his revolt against the origin. He finds everything that is necessary for sedition in himself – to put it more precisely, in his capacity for freedom, his most important endowment. By virtue of this, he can, parodying divine creation *ex nihilo*, generate his 'no' from the abyss of an unmotivated act of the will. (Sloterdijk 2017, 58)

The figure of Satan dramatises the transformation of determination, as the passive, helpless and hopeless condition of being-determined, into determination as positive intention, the resolution to have no truck with the humiliating fingers-crossed of salvation: 'Only from unmotivated freedom does he carry out his turn against

everything that represents order and divine precept. He realizes himself as the owner (*Eigner*) of his obstinacy (*Eigensinn*)' (Sloterdijk 2017, 59)

Not surprisingly, contemporary popular religion has jettisoned the theology of desperation, finding divine energy rather than the workings of the devil in desperation. A recent book on religious renewal reads the stirring of the Reformation as God's way of engineering renewal through desperation, as 'God began working with desperate men to form a groundswell of truth in preparation for his first great tsunami wave revival, which broke forth in great power as Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenburg' (Wright and Wright 2007, 87).

Describing the necessity to part from Cleopatra because of the threat of 'civil swords' in Italy, Shakespeare's Antony identifies two sources for the looming conflict. One is the fact that the defeated Pompey 'creeps apace,/Into the hearts of such as have not thrived/Upon the present state, whose numbers threaten'. But there is something else, for, at the same time, he tells Cleopatra, 'quietness, grown sick of rest, would purge/By any desperate change' (Shakespeare 1990, 97). So, on the one hand, there is tension, grievance, resentment, determination: on the other hand, there is something like the opposite, namely lethargy and indifference, which are both the cause of sickness and a sickness themselves, and both urge some purgative change. Antony points to the paradoxical cooperation of two principles, one of a positive dynamism, in which a growing pressure must either be relieved or forcibly contained lest it burst out catastrophically, the other of a more complex kind, in which lethargy is itself seen as a growing pressure to its own counterforce in violence. The sympathetic logic of resemblance articulated by *Hamlet's* Claudius is familiar enough today: 'diseases desperate grown/By desperate appliance are relieved,/Or not at all' (Shakespeare 2016a, 392). Less familiar, but a powerful force, and the more powerful for its seeming unaccountability, is the stress of stress privation.

Antony's words point us to the mysteriously stressive effect of lowered stress, and therefore to the need, not to reduce, but actively to strive for tonic and sanative conditions of pressure. Lethargy is a suspicious condition in early modern writing, being associated with the effects of apoplexy, conceived as a kind of convulsive numbness. Iago warns Othello that he must not disturb Cassio's epileptic fit: 'The lethargy must have his quiet course:/If not, he foams at mouth, and by and by/Breaks out to savage madness' (Shakespeare 2016b, 261). Lethargy is not just the opposite of madness, it also harbours it. Shakespeare makes the link between lethargy and apoplexy again in *Coriolanus*, in the words of the servingman who is aroused by Coriolanus's arrival:

Let me have war, say I. It exceeds peace as far as day does night. It's spritely, walking, audible and full of vent. Peace is a very apoplexy, lethargy; mulled, deaf, sleepy, insensible; a getter of more bastard children than war's a destroyer of men. (Shakespeare 1998, 307)

The dividend of desperation is the permission it gives to an ideal of pure action, a permission that precisely has the warrant of pure force, overflowing the need for any permission.

The effect is to subjectivise desperation, in the spasmodic self-affirmation which an extremity of hopelessness seems to coerce. A word came into being in the early seventeenth century to name the one turned by subjection to despair into a desperate subject. Influenced by fantasies of the malign or devilish Latin villains of the theatrical imagination, the faux-Spanish *desperado* was formed on the model of words like *mutinado*, sometimes paired with words like *renegado* (Anon 1652, 3). Despite the appearance of being a masculine singular, one of its earliest appearances of the word 'desperado' to characterise the figure of the 'fainting soul' in Giles Fletcher's *Christs Victorie* (1610), 'Whom when as sad Repentance comming spies,/The holy Desperado wip't her swollen eyes' (Fletcher 1610, 20). During the seventeenth century, the word tended to be used rather contemptuously and to signify a wretched or tatterdemalion sort of outlaw, or various kinds of religious reprobate or infidel, such as Quakers or Catholics. The biography of John Allin, a planter in Surinam who was executed for an assassination attempt on the colony's head, Lord Willoughby, records that 'he scorned contests with private men, for he was born to blow up Parliaments, destroy Kingdoms, &c. and these and such like swelling Vapours would often arise from the frothy brain of this *Desperado*' (Byam 1665, 2). By the eighteenth century, the word had become established as a name for pirates, brigands and outlaws of all kinds, habitually met with in 'bands' and 'gangs', and described as 'fiendish', 'infamous', 'bold' or 'fell'.

The religious meanings were still at work in references to different kinds of renegades and outlaws as desperate, or desperadoes, with the implication that, to place yourself beyond the hope of salvation was also to put yourself the reach of morality and law, rendering you capable of anything, once the door has sprung open of the cage of hope. But from the eighteenth century desperation passed increasingly from a religious into an amorous or sexual register. In the process it was also conventionalised, as part of the production of the *sujet-supposé-sexuel*. The experience of sexual-romantic love was characterised by its capacity to induce states of desperate, unassuageable desire, the more desperate the desire, the more authentically intense. Of all the acts to which desperation is thought to drive, it is suicide that most typifies its extremity, as in the conclusion to Thomas Flatman's 'The Desperate Lover': 'Tis all th' amends our wretched Fates can give,/That none can force a desperate man to Live. (Flatman 1686, 105). Accordingly, Flatman can affirm elsewhere, in 'Love's Bravo's Song' 'Who would be happy, must be desperate (Flatman 1686, 110).

The spread of revolutionary glamour at the end of the nineteenth century encouraged a return of the imago of Romantic-Satanic desperation. Joseph Conrad was particularly interested by the marshalling of pure negativity or anarchic ultimism in the service of the idea of social revolution. *The Secret Agent* ends with the socialite socialist Comrade Ossipon brooding on the melodramatic words with which the suicide of Winnie Verloc has been reported: ' "An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair." ' Winnie's despair at the cynical murder of her son by her husband and her desertion by Ossipon is counterposed to the revolutionary Professor who aims to harness the force of desperation:

"Stay," said Ossipon hurriedly. "Here, what do you know of madness and despair?"

The Professor passed the tip of his tongue on his dry, thin lips, and said doctorally:

“There are no such things. All passion is lost now. The world is mediocre, limp, without force. And madness and despair are a force. And force is a crime in the eyes of the fools, the weak and the silly who rule the roost. You are mediocre. Verloc, whose affair the police has managed to smother so nicely, was mediocre. And the police murdered him. He was mediocre. Everybody is mediocre. Madness and despair! Give me that for a lever, and I’ll move the world. Ossipon, you have my cordial scorn. You are incapable of conceiving even what the fat-fed citizen would call a crime. You have no force.” He paused, smiling sardonically under the fierce glitter of his thick glasses. (Conrad 2007, 244-5)

The novel ends with the Professor walking, unsuspected, with his thumb on the detonator of the bomb with which he is wired: ‘He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable – and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world’ (Conrad 2007, 246).

As defeat turned into defiance, desperation has been the characteristic in the literary tradition largely of lone and proudly lonely individuals: Satan, Faustus, Manfred. Though the idea of collective desperation may seem oxymoronic, it is in fact regularly aimed at, through a paradoxical system of desperation-production. The phantasm of collective desperation allows for the stiffening and lengthening of impulsiveness into intent, and the sense that desperate or radical actions might attain to the condition of a project deliberated and agreed upon. Collectivity can produce effervescence, as Durkheim noted, but it can also temper and direct it, stockpiling levels of excitement, precisely through holding it back, as a standing reserve of the potential to erupt in decisive, irresistible action: ‘Beware the fury of a patient man’ (Dryden 2003, 203).

This leads to the discovery in modern life of what Thoreau quotably called ‘quiet desperation’:

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things. (Thoreau 1999, 9)

Antonio in *Twelfth Night* is apprehended in a street-fight, ‘desperate of shame and state’ (Shakespeare 2008, 325), signalling a desperation that goes beyond the discipline of social and religious hope. Thoreau’s quiet desperation is itself the name of social discipline, for it is a desperation turned to the purposes of sedation.

Loud or hushed, there is no doubt that desperation will at any time name the condition of many: the imprisoned, the exiled, the starving, the oppressed, the destitute, or sick

unto death. And yet it must also be recognised that desperation is more, or possibly slightly less, than a condition of things. Desperation is a social mythos, tight-laced with poetic expectations and entailments. Desperation is essentially figured, or narrated, even when it is experienced. If the worst is not, as long as we can say this is the worst, then conversely, there is no desperation until desperation has been announced. Like war, citizenship, and possibly love, desperation must be declared, often, though not invariably, by the desperado. Desperation takes one to the edge of all norms of social comportment, and potentially beyond every form of prescribed behaviour; and yet, for that very reason, must be understood in transaction with such prescriptions. Like tragedy and comedy, desperation is a genre rather than a phenomenon-as-such.

To speak of collectivity is necessarily, and more than ever today, to speak of the effects of media. Media are thought of as communicating semantic content, in the form of ideas and representations. This can be true of of slow, cool, word-based media. But the acceleration and consequent inflammation of media-exchange, at each stage of the cycle, expression, transfer and reception, makes of it simultaneously an agitative engine – an engine impelled by the need to produce agitation – and a self-monitoring thermometric apparatus, in the way suggested by Peter Sloterdijk:

Because groups always have projects – be they work or festivals, wars or elections – and because they are always “worked up” or agitated about something or other – be it catastrophes, enemy states, crimes, or scandals – they constantly keep revolving the thematic material that they use to communicate internally about their situation, or rather, about their immune status or stress-status. By means of its current themes, a group takes its own fever temperature; and through its fever, it generates its own operative unity as an endogenously closed context of agitation. (Sloterdijk 2006, 6)

In an accelerated and generalised condition, the principal function of media is not to transmit information, but to provide a real-time fever chart or stock-exchange of agitations, with the state of the market itself a source of feedback, whether agitating or analgesic. More important than the principle of ‘agency’ that is currently held so sacred, because it characterises the system as a whole and at every point rather than the local actions of elements within it, is the fact of agitation, a word that means both a state of motion and the transmission of that motion. Latin *agere* means to act, or move: *agitare* means to act in order to impart motion to something else. The contagious nature of agitation means that it is always, or always tends towards, a kind of co-agitation, or cogitation, which Varro derives, perhaps not entirely spuriously, from the idea of driving or forcing together: ‘*Cogitare* “to consider” is said from *cogere* “to bring together”: the mind *cogit* “brings together” several things into one place, from which it can choose. [*Cogitare* a *cogendo* dictum: mens plura in unum cogit, unde eligere possit]’ (Varro 1951, 212-13). Varro insists on speech as a particularly forceful kind of action

cum cogitamus quid et eam rem agitamus in mente, agimus, et cum pronuntiamus, agimus. Itaque ab eo orator agere dicitur causam et augures augurium agere dicuntur, quom in eo plura dicant quam faciant.

when we *cogitamus* ‘consider’ something and *agitamus* ‘turn it over’ in mind, we *agimus* ‘are acting,’ and when we make an utterance, we *agimus* ‘are acting.’ Therefore from this the orator is said *agere* ‘to plead’ the case, and the augurs are said *agere* ‘to practice’ augury, although in it there is more saying than doing. (Varro 1951, 212-13)

Varro even derives the word *caseus*, cheese, from this kind of forcing together, ‘milk that is *coactum*, pressed’, though of course before compaction comes coction, and churning. *Cogito ergo sum*: I concoct, I stir the pot: therefore I am.

Sloterdijk sees this agitation as a kind of cohering force – ‘Groups vibrate with a constant, internally generated agitation that transforms normative stress into their normal pitch’ (Sloterdijk 2006, 6). But agitation need not cancel out immunologically into coherence. not only can the fretting about catastrophe create coherence, this kind of coherence-in-agitation can bubble over into genuine catastrophe. Catastrophes do indeed sometimes happen and perhaps, in the long run, as flatly noted by Carroll’s gnat, they always happen.

The affect-reservoir that is both constituted and registered by the systemic excitations of media is governed by the logic of exaggeration. The exorbitant mass of media exchanges and events produces exorbitance as its characteristic mode, meaning that only overdoing it will do. The reservoir is agitated by the cross currents of inflation and habituation, each produced by and producing the other. The gravitational pull of the inherited archive of superseded and busted-flush overstatements prompts ever more strenuous exaggerations, even as familiarity and recognition suck at the feet of every new effort to raise the stakes. The arousing of a purgative state of desperation is continually at stake.

Absurdity always lurks in this hyperbole, just as it always sniggered at the edge of Satanic desperation, this being suggested in Carroll’s embodiment of vehemence in *The Hunting of the Snark*:

As to temper the Jubjub’s a desperate bird,
Since it lives in perpetual passion:
Its taste in costume is entirely absurd –
It is ages ahead of the fashion. (Carroll 1995, 81)

The jogonalong rhyme of ‘passion’ and ‘fashion’ is a winking hint at the mechanisation of passion, and the passion of the machine.

To evoke affects is to suggest some analogy between the condition of the feeling individual and the system of contagions. But in fact this kind of affect only exists at the level of system, like a verb that conjugates only in the plural. Indeed, it conjugates only as plurality. Number – the number of hits, likes, or followers – is not alien to the system of propagating agitations, for it consists only of quantalities.

What is described as populism has grown into a radicalism-grab, an appropriation from the political left that of the dangerous and desperado vehemence that had previously been its affective monopoly. Danger promises lordship: *danger* derives from domination, with dangerous meaning arrogant or rigorous until about 1400, and *danger* being an Old French term for lordship over a forest, and by extension the rent

payable to the lord by tenants). The clue to the link between desperation and sovereignty should have been, long before now, the indifference to all arguments of a pragmatic or self-interested nature, whether among Trump's deplorables or Brexit imponderables, and the ways in such groups have turned the accusations that what they are doing and saying is in countless ways 'unthinkable' into sources of self-certification. One must think in particular of the ease, even the relish, with which Brexiteers turned the prospect of the chaos threatened by a disorderly departure from the EU into a purgative promise. Populist right-radicals have discovered the fantasy that apron-clinging liberals have forgotten, that chaos is cleansing.

Desperate Studies

'Desperate measures', a phrase that seems to become common from the end of the seventeenth century, seem absurd, because desperation is what demands, or allows one to go beyond measure. Demands, or allows: that is, demands that allowance be given for extreme measures, and allows that demand to be made. But the action that springs from desperation need not be explosive or uncontrolled. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Orlando says of the young man he takes the disguised Rosalind to be that he has been 'tutored in the rudiments/Of many desperate studies by his uncle,/Whom he reports to be a great magician' (Shakespeare 2004, 333). Marlowe's Dr. Faustus is the most celebrated embodiment of the will to forbidden study as the proof of despair in God. He begins the play voicing his dissatisfaction with medicine, even though his bills are 'hung up as monuments,/Whereby whole cities have escaped the plague/And thousand desperate maladies been cured' (Marlowe 2008, 188). His obstinacy grows in the dream of commanding spirits who will 'Resolve me of all ambiguities,/Perform what desperate enterprise I will' (Marlowe 2008, 142), and in his settled resolve to embrace his damnation, 'Seeing Faustus hath incurr'd eternal death/By desperate thoughts against Jove's deity' (Marlowe 2008, 195). At the last, an old man implores him to 'stay thy desperate steps' (Marlowe 2008, 237), but Faustus chooses to have no choice but to persist in denying the possibility of mercy: 'Accursèd Faustus, where is mercy now?/I do repent, and yet I do despair' (Marlowe 2008, 238). This is the origin of the strangely muted ultimism of academic endeavour.

For desperation also has an epistemic or, to give an airing to the term I have suggested in *The Madness of Knowledge*, an epistemopathic register, where epistemopathy concerns not what we know, but what we feel about knowing, and help ourselves to feel through it. Indeed, one might say that a certain knowledge, or pseudo-epistemic sensation of knowing, is necessary to every desperate ultimism, that must be fuelled by the conviction that no more moderate alternatives to desperate measures remain. The pious can live in blind and craven pragmatism, but the Satanic radical must ground their self-grounding impulse to ultimate action in the certainty that all is lost. The epistemopathic temper that has come to dominate a certain kind of academic writing in the humanities and social sciences, is that of an institutionalised radicalism, circling round themes of limit, crisis and ultimate as modes of maintaining equilibrium and cohesiveness in self-similarity. Radicalism deploys a paradoxically deliberated desperation in its coolly reckless assumption that only absolute change, involving the extirpation of whatever can be plausibly represented as the current order of things,

will result in anything that could count as real change. The academic radical must calmly and nonchalantly keep themselves and their readers talked into this edge-of-time disposition. Students in the humanities learn quickly that this kind of institutionalised radicalism is the only intellectual posture that will ensure their safe passage through the university, or, for preference, recycle them back into it. Susan Sontag's *Styles of Radical Will* uses the word radical as a vaguely intensifying gesture throughout, never attempting any such things as an account of its style. It would however, be a singular and valuable exercise to unfold the richly suggestive anomaly in her title – the question of how will might be styled is certainly worth asking. But it just this 'quietness, grown sick of rest', that the current authoritarian modes of revolutionary enthusiasm 'would purge/By any desperate change'.

One may often say of desperation what may be said of anger, that it is the object rather than the cause of action. One is not angry because one is in the right, rather, anger exists as the forced and forcing proof of one's rightness, the demonstration that one's rightness can ignite and be annealed in its own fire. One may similarly crave the absoluteness, along with the overriding or absolution from choice, that the threat of, or resort to desperate measures seems to guarantee. Desperation is therefore an ethical, or rather perhaps a metaethical category, a way of hotwiring deliberation.

But the problem with desperate remedies is that they inevitably corrupt the salvific purity of the desperation that animates them. Any action implies or allows for consequential or contradictory reaction. Desperate measures, however radical and off-the-scale they may seem, are thereby drawn into moderating adjustments and temporising art and craft. The work performed by almost any literary work that deals with desperate remedies is to follow out the the devil-in-the-detail collapse of absolutising action back into the sticky web of implications and entailments. It is a pattern that plays itself out in many number of novels, especially Thomas Hardy's *Desperate Remedies*, and Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* and *The Secret Agent*, that demonstrate how little hope can repose in hopelessness and the radicalising impulses to which it can give rise.

The assurance, that is regularly and reassuringly emitted and exchanged nowadays, that we live in desperate times, is the immunological defence against the very extension of immunological systems and countermeasures which otherwise threaten to drive desperation into extinction. The announcement of the Anthropocene in particular supplies a Fortunatus's purse of existential urgency. In the necessity for a kind of desperate prudence it oxymoronically seems to mandate, it provides the same exquisite combination of absolute jeopardy and absolute responsibility previously provided by the threat of nuclear war, the latter being a threat that while never in fact having diminished by one iota, has been progressively drained of its capacity to incite desperation. But unlike nuclear terror, climate change is also supplied with the exquisite intensification of the countdown, formed from a multifactorial formula of years, tons of emission gases and degrees of warming. Measures of desperation are requisite for desperate measures.

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