section **two**

THE ARTISTIC MINDSET

chapter two

Artistic Grit

THIS CHAPTER EXAMINES TWO VERSIONS of artistic grit. The first refers to the strength to persevere and push on, regardless of the odds. Through examining artists such as Tom Waits, J.K. Rowling and the Fagen and Becker duo who made up Steely Dan, we see that where the risk of failure is greatest, there, so often, is found the artist. The second version of grit is moral integrity. Here we'll see how Bob Dylan, Neil Young and Talk Talk took up principled positions in the name of art. The chapter closes with a look at the relationship of grit to the potentially compromising influences of state and capital.

> The reasonable man adapts himself to the world. The unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.
> GEORGE BERNARD SHAW[1]

> Creativity takes courage.
> HENRI MATISSE[2]

> One's only chance is to be one's self.
> RAYMOND MCINTYRE[3]

> Every so often, a painter has to destroy painting. Cézanne did it. Picasso did it with Cubism. Then Pollock did it. He busted our idea of a picture all to hell. Then there could be new paintings again.
> WILLEM DE KOONING[4]

> To be a guerrilla, to be on your own, is far more rewarding in the end, if you have the determination to carry it through.
> DAVID BOWIE[5]

One of the best novels to come out of the Western genre is True Grit[6] by Charles Portis. Set in the 1870s, it tells the story of the 14-year-old Mattie Ross, from Dardanelle, Arkansas, and her quest for justice after their hired hand, Torn Chaney, shot her father in cold blood for $150 and two Californian gold pieces. Mattie discovers that Chaney has joined up with a band of outlaws in the adjacent Indian

Territory, a legal no-man's-land under the sole jurisdiction of US Marshals and so sets out to find a marshal to join her, someone with the ruthless qualities required to bring in her man. The local sheriff suggests a number of potential candidates, some marshals excellent at tracking and others with religious sensibilities who bring in their prisoners alive. But the meanest of them all is a certain Rooster Cogburn, “a pitiless man, who's double tough”, according to the sheriff. Opting for Rooster, Mattie seeks him out in his rented backroom behind the Chinese grocery store. Though he is living like a “billy-goat” and has an inclination for “pulling the cork”, Rooster's fallen circumstances belie his resilience, his gundog persistence and his moral courage. As the book plays out, he is revealed, ultimately, as the man of “true grit” - a defining metaphor of those final days of Frontier America. Roald Dahl, for one, reckoned the book to be one of the finest he'd come across.[7]

Presenting this as a requirement for getting through the hard times, the “true grit” quality of Rooster Cogburn is also what characterises many great artists. Rooster's grit carries notions of persistence, determination, doggedness and, importantly, a degree of moral courage. As with Rooster, a number of creatives have taken principled positions, irrespective of the cost. This is grit, possibly in its highest form.

Grit as determination in the face of failure

> The best thing ever to happen to Steve [Jobs} is when we fired him, told him to get lost.
>
> ARTHUR ROCK, EARLY INVESTOR IN APPLE INC.[8]

> I know entrepreneurship is usually associated with success, and invention is usually associated with excitement. But ewer my life the only thing consistently associated with entrepreneurship is failure. And the only thing consistently associated with inuenticm is frustration.
>
> DEAN KAMEN, INVENTOR OF THE SEGWAY TRANSPORTER[9]

The stubborn streak characteristic of grit means that you can hear “no” from a hundred record labels or publishers and still persist until you hear the ultimate “yes”, implying some level of emotional resilience. When starting out or, later, maturing into a newer style of art, many of the great artists have been forced to endure refusal or to busk on the sidelines. Those prepared to guts out these twilight times, remaining true to their art and themselves, are those left with a chance of making it through to the

end. The backstories describing perseverance-to-the-final-point- of-breakthrough are often instructive in the sense that they demonstrate the importance of commitment to self-purpose and artistic vision. While the role of luck is clearly critical (as will be argued in a later chapter), without artistic commitment and a certain boneheadedness, almost all initial promise is doomed to flounder. Back in April 1961, as young boneheads just discovering their mojo at Hamburg's god-forsaken Top Ten Club, The Beatles stand as an early example of true grit.[10] In that same year, Dylan, too, was to suffer public indifference. At a concert staged at the Carnegie Chapter Hall, the venue was only a quarter full and, although the promoter, Izzy Young, had agreed to split the gate with Dylan, when it became clear that the 52-strong audience was not going to cover costs, Dylan received nothing more than a few spare dollars from Young's own pocket. 'He took it pretty straight," Young recalled later.

In the mid-'70s, as an opening act to Frank Zappa, the young Tom Waits also recalled being jeered and spat upon. "I'd stand there and say, 'Well, thank-you. Glad you enjoyed that one. I've got a lot of new material I'm going to play for you tonight.' It went right downhill and I never got my fingers underneath to pull it up. It's amusing in retrospect, but there were some nights when, Jesus Christ, does this type of work look interesting to you?"[11] There were nights when it was like pulling teeth, lamented Waits. "The artist business is merchandise. I see it from the bowel now. One night off in two weeks. The problem with performing is it's repetitive, and unless I can come up with something new each night, I find it gruelling. Like I'm just a monkey on a stick. So I try to stretch out nightly, make something of it. And that's very valuable to me, and a lot of songs come out of that."[12]

As some palliative perhaps, Queen's lead guitarist, Brian May, has commented: "If you have enough talent and enough will to succeed, you will get there by whatever route presents itself. Once you have scaled the castle walls with the sword in your hand, it matters little how you got there."[13] Keith Richards endorsed this view, stating that, as a school dropout in 1959: "I had big ideas, even though I had no idea how to put them into operation. That required meeting a few other people later on. I just felt that I was smart enough, one way or another, to wriggle out of this social net and playing the game. My parents were brought up in the Depression, when if you got something, you kept it and held it and that was it. Bert [my dad] was the most unambitious man in the world. Meanwhile, I was a kid and I didn't even know what ambition meant. I just felt the constraints. The society and everything I was growing up in was too small for me. Maybe it was just teenage testosterone and angst, but I had to look for a way out."[14] Self-deprecatingly, perhaps, R.E.M's Peter Buck asserted that sometimes you don't even need talent. Recalling his early punk-inspired days with R.E.M., the only band he'd ever been in, Buck said that he'd always been arrogant

enough to think that if he was in a band, it wouldn't matter that he couldn't play. “If you have good enough taste, you don't have to be a great musician to make great music. When the band started, I knew about five chords and a Chuck Berry lick. I didn't even know bar chords,” he said.[15]

As a young graduate in her twenties, what J.K. Rowling feared most for herself was not poverty but failure. Addressing the Harvard graduating class of 2008, she confessed that a mere seven years after graduation day she had failed on an epic scale. Unemployed, divorced, a single parent and as poor as it was possible to be in modern Britain without being homeless, Rowling said that, by every usual standard, she was the biggest failure she knew. Such failure was not fun, she added. With no idea that there was going to be any form of fairy-tale resolution and no idea how far the tunnel extended, for a long time any light at the end of the tunnel served as a hope rather than a reality. Despite these setbacks, Rowling told the Harvard assembly that the consequences of her failure gave her an existential sense of focus because, as she put it: “Failure meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena I believed I truly belonged. I was set free, because my greatest fear had already been realised, and I was still alive, and I still had a daughter whom I adored, and I had an old typewriter and a big idea. And so rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.” This said, Rowling warned her audience that, while they might never plumb such depths, some failure in life is inevitable, stating that it is impossible to live without failing at something unless you Live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all, in which case you fail by default. Failure, she said, gave her an inner security that she had never acquired by passing exams. Indeed, it taught her things about herself that she could not have learnt in any other way, for example, discovering that she had a strong will and was indeed more disciplined than she had suspected. “The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity. Such knowledge is a true gift, for all that it is painfully won, and it has been worth more to me than any qualification I ever earned.” With hindsight, she reflected that she would remind her 21-year-old self that personal happiness lies in knowing that life is not a checklist of acquisition or achievement. “Your qualifications, your CV, are not your life, though you will meet many people of my age and older who confuse the two,” she concluded. “Life is difficult, and complicated, and beyond anyone's total control, and the humility to know that will enable you to survive its vicissitudes.”[16]

Perhaps the most prolonged brush with initial failure was Don McLean's, whose 1970 debut album, Tapestry, including the now standard “And I love you so” (a subsequent international hit for Perry Como), endured rejections from 34 labels before he signed with Mediarts. Such sustained agony is possibly rivalled by the breakthrough story of Steely Dan, the iconoclastic ‘70s jazz-pop outfit, who struggled mightily to break into New York's music scene. Amidst the Aquarius-age-student-discontent of 1969, this singer-songwriter duo, made up of Donald Fagen and Walter Becker, were as close to nowhere as one could possibly imagine. Just out of college and holed up in a squalid Brooklyn apartment, the precociously gifted yet utterly uncool twosome would venture out, cold calling on Manhattan's music recording establishment. So destitute that they could not even afford to put together a demo tape, the duo resorted instead to assaulting their potential bosses with live renditions of their latest offerings, cheesily plunked out on any available out-of-tune office piano. Bemused record executives would baulk at these weirdos and their obscure lyrics, using any pretext to get them out, usually with the words “zero commercial prospects”.[17] Despite these early hardships, the two persisted, signing eventually with the financially distressed music publisher JATA Enterprises. When they knocked on JATA founder Kenny Vance's door, they looked like hobos - Vance later describing them as “insects, with no vibe corning from them”. “Librarians on acid” was another descriptive term he used at the time.[18] Despite their appalling appearance, in Vance, their warped persistence and musical self-belief finally won them a manager and the chance to record a twelve-song demo-tape. Even this proved to be a failure. Just as when they'd live serenaded their reluctant audiences, now the tape left the suits running for cover, embarrassed and nonplussed by the duo's references to jazz greats such as Parker, Blakey, Mingus and Evans. Namechecks intimidated Vance, whom the sententious Becker once accused of having the “soul of a kreplach”.[19] Despite such ignominies, by late 1971, things began to improve, with JATA hiring out the duo as songwriters to the ABC label in Los Angeles. Once inserted into the lurid West Coast vibe that they would so viciously parody in later albums, Fagen and Becker were soon signed on as ABC recording artists. Adopting the Steely Dan stage name, they began their first recording, Can't Buy a Thrill, the next year. Although a further six highly regarded albums followed before they temporarily disbanded in l 981, were it not for their initial reserves of determination and self-belief, it is highly unlikely that Becker and Fagen would ever have made it through.

Grit as artistic integrity

When we signed with them, they knew what they were getting. They knew they weren’t going to get some easily manipulated pre-packaged pop group. That was not

going to happen. What they wanted, I think, was the integrity that we had to offer. What they wanted was the kind of street cred or cache that R.E.M. could bring to them and the chance that we would give them a hit or two. What happened was we gave them a bunch of hits. And we became huge.

MICHAEL STIPE EXPLAINING THE PROCESS OF R.E.M,'S 1988 SIGN-UP WITH WARNER BROTHERS[20]

Having attained some level of achievement, the integrity of established artists is likely to be challenged as they move on to newer forms of art. This may require a lot of gritty staying power. A case in point is the French artist Henri Matisse who, with Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp, is regarded as one of the radical drivers of visual art in the early part of the 20th century. In 1909, at the age of 40, Matisse put on the most comprehensive exhibition of his work to date, his aim being to showcase the sequential progression to the stripped-down minimalism he had achieved. His reviewers responded to his efforts with dismissive cruelty, accusing him of crude overindulgence, befuddlement and wanton savagery. Established critics skewered him for inconsistency and lack of clear artistic vision. As his biographer Hilary Spurling observed: "One after another they attributed their inability to make head or tail of what Matisse was doing to his shortcomings rather than their own. Attacks came from all quarters. The young and progressive were as splenetic as the elderly and conservative."[21] Despite the severity of this personal criticism, Matisse endured, moving, in time, to present a coherent line of artistic achievement that would establish him as one of the founders of Modernism, Fauvism and Impressionism. A few decades later, Hemingway was proving equally radical in his approach to writing. "A writer's problem does not change," he said. "It is always how to write truly and having found out what is true to project in such a way that it becomes part of the experience of the person who reads it."[22] Critical to this task, he suggested, was some kind of "built in shock proof shit detector". All great writers have this, he said.[23] Author and historian Paul Johnson has suggested that, while Hemingway was deeply flawed on a number of levels, the one thing he did not lack was artistic integrity. His lifetime project sought to create fresh ways of writing English and, in his fictional works especially, he was remarkably successful. "It was one of the salient events in the history of our language and is now an inescapable part of it," said Johnson.[24] Bob Dylan offered an additional perspective on artistic grit when, during his infamous 1965/66 world tour, he switched mid-concert from acoustic to electric guitar. Up to that point Dylan was the crowned prince of folk music and the darling of the civil rights movement, being labelled as the "spokesman of a generation".[25] Such was the richness of Dylan's craft that Paul Simon believed, at least for a while, he defined the genre.[26] Anyone trying to understand the extent to which an art form and its artist may forsake its fan base for the sake of new

art would do well to examine Dylan's 1963 to '66 musical transition from quiet acoustic albums such as The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan and The Times They Are a-Changin', to the subsequent Bringing It All Back Home and Highway 61 Revisited, and especially the electrifying Blonde on Blonde. Given the earnest, folksy foundation of his earlier work, his decision to go electric was, understandably perhaps, met with outrage. On the notorious bootleg recording of the 1965 Manchester concert, the acoustic disciples were scandalised, one famously yelling out: "Judas!" to an equally unimpressed Dylan, who replied "I don't believe you, you're a liar!" before ripping into a snarling version of "Like a Rolling Stone", instructing his band to "play it fucking loud".[27]

Yet, just as his fans were adjusting to the electrified format, the muse was pushing Dylan yet further away from them. Following a freak motorbike accident in July 1966, he sought sanctuary on a farm close to Woodstock. Now married and seemingly dismissive of the increasingly popular psychedelic format á la Sgt. Pepper (1967),[28] he'd cut his hair, taken up painting and spent time each day reading his Bible. The songs from the consequent 1968 album, John Wesley Harding, were massively pared-down and countrified. Recording in Nashville, Dylan reportedly arrived at the studio with the numbers fully composed. The album, including the now standard "All Along the Watchtower", took only nine hours to record, in contrast to Sgt. Pepper, which had blown out to five long months. Later Dylan's drummer, Kenny Buttrey, confirmed the new inclination towards the less polished format: "We went in and knocked 'em out like demos," he said. "It seemed to be the rougher the better. He would hear a mistake and laugh a little bit to himself as if [to say], Great, man, that's just great. Just what I'm looking for."[29] This was just another phase in the chameleon-like process of Dylan's art. His 1975 album Blood on the Tracks would return to a far more measured approach, recorded Steely Dan-style, with a number of different session musicians, in two recording locations. The resultant album is broadly acclaimed as one of his finest ever.

A further instance of cat-like independence is the equally obdurate Neil Young, who, at numerous stages of his career, has also done the principled swerve into the underbrush. Following the success of early '70s albums such as After the Gold Rush and Harvest, the singer famously retreated from his lucrative, mellow, countrified style. By way of explanation, he claimed that while songs like "Heart of Gold" (off Harvest) had put him in "the middle of the road", "[t]ravelling there soon became a bore so I headed for the ditch. A rougher ride, but I saw more interesting people there."[30] This rougher ride would last three years, yielding some of the most critically acclaimed albums of his legacy, most especially Tonight's the Night, recorded in 1973 in a series of tequila-soaked jam sessions but released only two years

later, and On the Beach, an album initially avoided by fans but now lauded as an exemplar of the genre. Reflecting on the 1973 tour that featured work almost solely from his hitherto unreleased Tonight's the Night, Young remarked: “It was dark but it was good ... maybe as artistic a performance as I've given. I think there was more drama in Tonight's the Night because I knew what I was doing to the audience. But the audience didn't know if I knew what I was doing. I was drunk outta my mind on that tour. Hey you don't play bad when you're drunk, you just play real slow. You don't give a shit. Really don't give a shit. I was fucking with the audience. From what I understand, the way rock 'n' roll unfolded with Johnny Rotten and the punk movement - that kind of audience abuse - kinda started with that tour. I have no idea where the concept came from. Somebody else musta done it first, we all know that, whether it was Jerry Lee Lewis or Little Richard, somebody shit on the audience first.”[31]

On this infamous tour, Young would toy drunkenly with his audience, introducing the show with a slurred: “Welcome to Miami Beach ladies and gentlemen. Everything is cheaper than it looks,” before loping through the title track at least two or three times during the set. At the show's conclusion, he would lean into the bemused multitude, offering at last to play a song that they were actually familiar with. The crowd, thinking that they were finally going to hear something off Harvest, would bellow in relief, whereupon Young would launch hilariously into one more lewd version of the same “Tonight's the Night”. Extending the tour to England, Young played a Bristol concert encore to nobody but Ahmet Ertegun, then owner of Atlantic Records. Reported Young later: “I said, ‘Ahmet, I played so good tonight I think I deserve my own private encore.’ So we went out and played ‘Tonight's the Night’ for the fourth time that evening ... with no-one left in the theatre.”[32]

Such was Young's antipathy towards the mainstream that, a decade later, he would provoke David Geffen of Geffen Records into a lawsuit, accusing him of producing music “atypical” of his art. Following some dabblings into techno and country music, it was the release of Young's 15th studio album in 1983, a ‘50s retro soiree entitled Everybody's Rockin', that proved the final straw. With no memorable songs, it was his shortest album ever, running a mere 25 minutes, and utterly unlike anything Young had ever done before. Once it became clear that the album was going to bomb, Geffen sued Young for producing music that was “not commercial” and “uncharacteristic of previous recordings”. Incensed, Young countersued Geffen for interference, his recording contract having stipulated complete artistic independence from the recording suits. In the subsequent settlement Young is reported to have told Geffen: “I'm not here to sell things. That's what other people do,” adding: “You hired me to do what I do, not what you do. As long as people don't tell me what to do,

there will be no problem."[33] This was not the end of Geffen's troubles. In the wake of this altercation, the then upstart indie band R.E.M. moved to scupper their own recording deal with Geffen, signing instead with Warner Brothers. Their future status as a '90s mega band would rankle with the posturing Geffen, serving as a future totem to recording labels tempted to micromanage the artistic delivery of their charges. Recently, Bob Dylan neatly explained why Young has remained a pre-eminent singer-songwriter of his generation: "An artist like Neil always has the upper hand ... It's the pop world that has to make adjustments. All the conventions of the pop world are only temporary and carry no weight. It's basically two things that have nothing to do with each other."[34]

Some years later, this time in the UK, the mishandling of another band would serve to further profile the sensitivities at play. Talk Talk, initially launched as a clone of the '80s New-Romantic boy band Duran Duran, later became known for following Dylan and Young's cue to veer off the tarmac. Contrasting with the typically inane pop banter, when he was being interviewed Talk Talk's lead singer, Mark Hollis, presented a dignified and intellectual persona, citing the influence of jazz and classical greats such as Davis, Coltrane, Bartók and Debussy. Asked to name his favourite band, however, Hollis namechecked Can, Otis Redding and Burt Bacharach, leaving the interviewer and audience nonplussed. Certainly listening to their first heavily synthesised '80s albums, The Party's Over and It's My life, the musical tie-in to these references would not have seemed immediately obvious. Though both recordings sold well enough, it was their third, 1986, album, The Colour of Spring that propelled them into the popular mainstream. Incorporating the UK hit single "Life's What You Make It", the Spring album went on to sell two million units, earning their EMI recording bosses sufficient revenue to grant their (by now) moody and introspective hirelings an unlimited budget for their following album. Given this opportunity to pursue their own artistic direction, Hollis and his co-writer and producer, Tim Friese-Greene, started recording the epic and groundbreaking Spirit of Eden (1987). Contrary to the then post-punk philosophy that crowd-pulling music could be laid down in an unpolished if not virtually raw format,[35] Eden took more than a glacial year to complete,[36] with Hollis insisting that no singles were to be taken from the album and that no EMI representatives be permitted to attend the London-based Wessex Studio recording sessions. Such was the sombre, avant-garde introspection of Eden that one music critic ventured: "It's the kind of record which encourages marketing men to commit suicide."[37] Doubting that the album had any commercial appeal, EMI requested the re-recording of certain songs and the inclusion of supplementary material; demands which Hollis refused to entertain. Then, pursuing the same line as Geffen, EMI moved to sue Talk Talk for producing "wilfully obscure"

and “uncommercial” music. While the lawsuit never stuck, it established grounds for the precedent clause of future recording contracts, that the output from any signed-up band or artist be commercially acceptable – a major defeat for artist-musicians going forward.

Upon its eventual UK release, the six-track Eden peaked at 19, leaving critics uncertain of its merits. Particularly worrisome was a 30-second gap of silence inserted between tracks three and four. Wrote Markus Berkmann of The Spectator: “It is either a work of immense merit and bravery or a load of bilge, and I cannot decide which.”[38] Any uncertainty has long since evaporated, with Eden lauded today as one of the ‘80s’ significant albums and a marker for many of the great bands that would follow. “Spirit of Eden has not dated,” opined Alan McGee of The Guardian 20 years later. “It's remarkable how contemporary it sounds, anticipating post-rock, The Verve and Radiohead. It's the sound of an artist being given the keys to the kingdom and returning with art.” Added McGee: “I find the whole story of one man against the system in a bid to maintain creative control incredibly heartening.”

Following the EMI bust-up, Talk Talk signed with Polydor for what would be their final album, Laughing Stock (1991). Issued on Polydor's old Verve jazz label, it also stretched the boundaries of avant-garde, though it would take a further six years before Hollis would make his final statement with the remarkably sparse and delicate Hollis, recorded Bon Iver-style, with just a single pair of microphones. Hollis has since remained silent, the album appearing to have taken his music to a point of conclusion.

Jazz great Bill Evans is possibly another who never compromised his artistic integrity. “The market doesn't influence my thinking in the slightest,” asserted the brilliant and tortured musical genius in one of his last interviews. “I know where I come from, where I am and what I have to work with, and I try to make what I consider to be the most total kind of musical and human statement within the means and tradition from which I came.”[39] This level of artistic integrity is remarkable given the sheer volume of 164 albums featuring the pianist between 1955 and 1980. Though many of these recordings were made without consent and released by record labels more interested in making a fast buck than producing well-recorded jazz, Evans was never short of work. Rotating between the Village Vanguard in New York, Ronnie Scott's in London, and Shelly's Manne-Hole in Los Angeles and performing regularly at jazz line-ups in Montreux, Stockholm, Oslo, Copenhagen, Paris and other jazz capitals in Europe, Evans kept a full card. He was dedicated throughout, never yielding to external pressure. Despite his quiet, introverted disposition and his debilitating addiction to drugs, over the more than two decades of his performing life, he was loved and adored by fans the world over.

Another gritty artist is Leonard Cohen. A poet and novelist long before he came to songwriting, Cohen's capacity to render extraordinary lyrics always exceeded his characteristically restrained sense of musical arrangement. The constantly evolving Cohen moved through a number of artistic and personal phases, including a five-year period in a Buddhist monastery (where he was ordained a Rinzai Zen Buddhist monk) and a messy financial court case in which it was found that his prior manager and lover had defrauded him of most of his life's earnings, leaving him, in 2005, with just $150,000 to his name. Much of the touring and recording that followed was driven by the consequent need to fund his retirement, resulting in a series of "old man" albums that compare well with those of Dylan and Johnny Cash. He is on record as acknowledging his struggles with liquor, women, depression and his genuine sense of poverty when crafting his songs. He stated in 2012 that he'd always felt he was scraping the bottom of the barrel when trying to get the songs together. "I never had the sense that I was standing in front of a buffet table with a multitude of choices," he said. "I felt I was operating in more what Yeats used to say was the 'foul rag and bone shop of the heart'. I just pick it together. I don't work with a sense of great abundance." Songwriting, he suggested, involved persistence, sweat and also a certain kind of "grace and illumination".[40]

In the South African context, few could be considered more physically resilient than Helen Martins. A virtual recluse all her life, this visionary sculptor – known as the Owl House Lady of Nieu Bethesda - was discovered only after she took her life on 8 August 1976, aged 78, by drinking caustic soda. The tiny village of Nieu Bethesda lies in the upper hills of the Karoo, roughly 50 kilometres north of Graaff-Reinet, near the famous Valley of Desolation. Until 1992, this town was without both electricity and piped municipal water. Here, in this remote and barren place, roughly midway through her life, Martins began her Owl House project - a work that took up most of her last 17 years, but which ultimately remained incomplete. In certain ways her eccentricities, her shyness and reclusiveness, became the means by which she could withstand the conservative apartheid craziness that consumed a large part of South African society during her time. Koos Malgas, her personal assistant who crafted so many of the cement statues at her Owl House, recalled: "They said she was crazy. Truly that is what they said. When I first came here, I also thought so. But after I worked there for a few months, I saw that she was not crazy. People said she was mad because she was a bit different to other people. Truly, she was more intelligent than the people in the village. She was very clever. I was a simple sheep shearer who came to work for her, and I learnt a great deal from her in order to be able to do this work." Granny Gongo Oliphant, who was employed by Martins, also saw her grit and steely reserve. "She dressed like the brown people," said Oliphant. "The white people did

not understand it. They said that she was crazy. Everything she did in that house, she did not do as if she was crazy - but out of understanding." In a feudal village of so much ill regard, one can only imagine how Martins struggled to hold on to a sense of purpose for as long as she did. Revisiting the Owl House on a stone-cold but sunny winter morning, I was moved by the strange paradox that beset this woman, the garden of her life, which she so yearned to see flourish with meaning and bloom with explosions of colour, was reduced, ultimately, to a cement garden: a dusty, sterile cemetery of figurines that lived with vitality and expression only in her mind's eye.

Was Martins merely expressing an inner world that the outer world could not comprehend and had turned its back upon? And, therefore, and more generally, to what extent is this drive to express "innerness" the lot of artists and creators per se? Is it their role to express what others find impossible to bring into the light? In some instances, it seems as if this role is actually forced upon them. If this is so, why are "non-artists" so incapable of self-reflection? And conversely, why, for the chosen artists, is the road to discovery so often so hard? Where do artists find sufficient inner resources?

Similar to many other artists who defy constructs of normality, Martins was never formally trained and employed unusual art materials, including cement and glass. Seeing her work as a personal progression of self-enquiry and innovative discovery, Martins worked neither for profit nor public recognition. Typical of an Outsider artist, she created for herself, her work a concrete expression of an inner dialogue with her own unconscious. Martins' biographer, Anne Emslie, notes: "There are other art labels that apply to this form of art. One of these is Naïve Art, describing the untutored vision; another is Art Brut. The latter is a term coined by Frenchman Jean Debuffet to describe art that is characterised by individuality and originality and which, as he says, 'thrives in other places than those socially assigned to the fine arts'."[41] A closer study of Martins' work and her context indicates quite clearly that these "other places" were both emotional and geographical, an enforced and painful estrangement from all aspects of the conventional. As an artist of grit, there can be no doubt that she succeeded in her ambition, but the cost was severe.

Moral courage versus state and capital

It is worth noting that those vested in the status quo tend to do whatever they can to preserve their power and maintain their position and rank in society. This is why creatives are so often the outsiders and outlaws. Steve Jobs, one of the greatest renegades of commerce, could have been paraphrasing Neil Young's ditch-swerve mentality when he put it this way: "If you want to live your life in a creative way, as an artist, you have to not look back too much. You have to be willing to take whatever

you've done and whoever you were and throw them away. The more the outside world tries to reinforce an image of you, the harder it is to continue to be an artist, which is why a lot of times, artist have to say, 'Bye. I have to go. I'm going crazy and I'm getting out of here.' And they go and hibernate somewhere. Maybe later they re-emerge a little differently."[42] Framed in this way Jobs highlights the ancient and ongoing battle between creativity on one side and the compulsion to civil conformity on the other.

In the final episode of the BBC series The Ascent of Man, Joseph Bronowski demonstrates this conflict, filming himself on the road that leads into Jerusalem. With the evening light glinting off the Holy City's distant roofs, Bronowski remarks the camera that, as a spiritual, intellectual and moral leader, Jesus would have walked this selfsame road en route to certain death at the hands of the system of government which regarded him as an enemy of the state. History reveals a long list of "leaders as outsiders" who, through dictates of conscience, chose to face down those in authority. Socrates (470-399 BC), Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), Galileo, (1564-1642), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), Martin Luther King (1929-1968) and Albert Einstein (1879-1955) are but some. Einstein's name is most especially apt since he was offered the presidency of Israel in l952, which he declined. Bronowski was under no illusions, stating in the Jerusalem scene that science "is a source of power that walks close to government, and that the state wants to harness". He went further, predicting that, if scientific knowledge allowed itself to he commodified by organs of power, then faith in role of knowledge and intellectual leadership would ultimately disintegrate under the weight of what he termed "cynicism". If, as per the Latin conventions, we equate the term "science" with all forms of knowledge, then Bronowski is not alone in this view. In the final volume of the Harry Potter series, J.K. Rowling invokes the ancient headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore, to pronounce on the damageing effects of state power on magical thinking: "Years passed. There were rumours about him. They said he had procured a wand of immense power. I, meanwhile, was offered the post of Minister of Magic, not once, but several times. Naturally, I refused. I had learned that l was not to be trusted with power ... I had proven, as a very young man, that power was my weakness and my temptation."[43]

J.R.R. Tolkien also takes a position on power in his 1954 epic fantasy The Lord of the Rings. Seen as a charm to defeat death and achieve immortality for its bearer, the power of the One Ring invariably becomes toxic. So, while conceived as a means of acquiring eternal life, wearers of the Ring are instead transformed into Ringwraiths: neither dying nor fully alive. At the start of the great trilogy, Frodo the Hobbit asks the wizard, Gandalf, to clarify his understanding of this power.

> "You say the ring is dangerous, far more dangerous than I guess. In what way?"
>
> "In many ways," answered the wizard. "It is far more powerful than I ever dared to think at first, so powerful that in the end it would utterly overcome anyone of mortal race who possessed it ... The lesser rings were only essays in the craft before it was full-grown ... But the Great Rings, the Rings of Power, they were perilous. A mortal, Frodo, who keeps one of the Great Rings, does not die, but he does not grow or obtain more life, he merely continues, until at last every minute is a weariness. And if he often uses the Ring to make himself invisible, he fades: he becomes in the end invisible permanently, and walks in the twilight under the eye of the Dark Power that rules the Rings. Yes, sooner or later - later, if he is strong or well-meaning to begin with, but neither strength nor good purpose will last - sooner or later the dark power will devour him."
>
> "How terrifying!" said Frodo.[44]

According to the literary critic Tom Shippey, Tolkien's more contemporary view on the progressive toxicity of power is a removal from the earlier medieval notions which suggested that acquired power merely revealed true character, though did not change it.[45] For Tolkien, by contrast, the Ring's power is corrosive of character, fitting closely with Lord Acton's famous statement: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."[46] A number of other books published at about the same time also explore this revisionist interpretation of power, namely: George Orwell's Animal Farm (1945), William Golding's Lord of the Flies (l954), and T.H. White's The Once and Future King, (1958).[47] These volumes should not, however, seduce you into believing that a blanket ban on relations between creativity and state and capital offers a solution to the problem of artistic compromise. To be sure, some important ideas need to be commercialised. Some degree of restraint is, however, required. Apple's Jonathan (Jony) Ive put it this way when trying to explain what it was like working prior to his link-up with Jobs: "There wasn't that feeling of putting care into a product, because we were trying to maximize the money we made ... All they wanted from us designers was a model of what something was supposed to look like from the outside, and then the engineers would make it as cheap as possible. I was about to quit."[48] Jobs was equally blunt about the quest to monetise at all costs, stating: "I hate it when people call themselves 'entrepreneurs' when what they're really trying to do is launch a startup and then sell or go public, so they can cash in and move on."[49]

As a young artist Bruce Springsteen was equally aware of the potential dangers posed by his status as a rising star. "The distractions and seductions of fame and success as I'd seen them displayed felt dangerous to me and looked like fool's gold," he declared in his recent biography. "The newspapers and rock rags were constantly

filled with tales of good lives that had lost focus and were stumblingly lived, all to keep the gods (and the people!) entertained and laughing. I yearned for something more elegant, more graceful and seemingly simpler. Of course in the end, nobody gets away clean, and eventually I'd take my own enjoyment (and provide my share of laughs) in fame's distractions and seductions, but not until I was sure I could handle them."[50]

Artistic integrity is surely the reason that a number of artists have refused to allow their work to be licensed for commercial endorsements. Tom Waits certainly condemned this practice: "Even worse are artists aligning themselves with various products, everything from Chrysler-Plymouth to Pepsi. I don't support it. I hate it. So there."[51] Neil Young was more direct: "Makes me look like a joke," as he once sang on "This Note's for You". Bronowski was explicit about this, stating that it was not the business of science to "inherit the earth" but rather to serve as the custodian of society's moral imagination. So, like Tolkien, he insisted that, without a moral core, the enlightenment project would succumb inevitably to the corrupting influence of power. As he put it, contemporary knowledge-structures would prevail only if they were founded on the recognition of "the uniqueness of man and a pride in his gifts and his works".

The pull of state and capital aside, creative knowledge systems currently face two additional threats. The first stems from the decline in maths and sciences in Western countries,[52] and the second from the decline in many schooling systems of creative disciplines such as art and dance. Authors such as Sir Ken Robinson maintain that most schools educate creativity out of children and hence handicap their ability to generate the insights necessary for fresh forms of knowledge and understanding.[53] As this book will argue, if society is to be elevated above its current plane of civilisation, these creative processes should be fostered, not undermined.

In conclusion, please note that the two forms of artistic grit, namely determination in the face of failure, and moral courage, are in certain ways similar. Moral courage is required in the face of failure while, in turn, courageous optimism often risks failure. Of course no one of integrity considers this when they take a principled stand. The stand is important, not whether it succeeds or not. One of the most wrenching evocations of failure-meets-grit relates to when Paul Simon sang "The Boxer" on Saturday Night Live, two weeks after the events of 11 September 2001 when Islamic radicals flew four passenger jets at key American installations causing the deaths of 2997 innocent people. Two of these jets targeted New York's World Trade Center's Twin Towers, bringing them to the ground in scenes of apocalyptic destruction. In that single incident, 343 firefighters and 72 law enforcement officers were counted among the dead, along with 2192 civilians. The majority of these

emergency workers were killed in the vain attempt to quell the Tower fires and rescue civilians more than 80 storeys up.

Prior to the show, Simon asked the producer, Lorne Michaels, whether he thought that "The Boxer", a song about the poverty and loneliness of a fighter, was the right song. Reported Simon: "Lorne said I think that somehow it makes a statement about persevering and enduring. I of course said whatever you want of me I'd be happy to do." On the night of the show, approximately 20 firemen and NYC policemen walked onto the studio floor, led by the then mayor, Rudolph Giuliani. The studio atmosphere was charged as Giuliani spoke grittily into the camera: "Good evening. Since September 11th, many people have called New York the city of heroes. Well these are the heroes. We will not let our decisions be made out of fear. We choose to live our lives in freedom." With the studio in half shadow, Simon then led his band into "The Boxer". It was a profound moment in American television history. With any artist of grit, the fighter will always remain, no matter what.

If you seek another symbol for moral courage, think of The Goldfinch, painted in 1654, the year of his death, by Carel Fabritius and made yet more famous by the 2013 novel of the same name by Donna Tartt. Close to the end of this magnificent book, Tartt moves in to examine what it is about this little bird that speaks so clearly to the heart of the human condition. "There's only a tiny heartbeat and solitude, bright sunny wall and no sense of escape. Time that doesn't move, time that couldn't be called time. And trapped in the heart of light: the little prisoner, And unflinching ... in this staunch little portrait, it's hard not to see the human in the finch. Dignified, vulnerable. One prisoner looking at another." As I first read these words, I became intensely aware of what Tartt was trying to say: that this metaphor speaks not about a generic-unconscious version of the human experience but of individuals aware of their inescapable suffering: struggling, like the goldfinch, just to be fully present. While the human version of this more conscious journey is so often exemplified by the artist, its potential calling lies within each and every one of us - if we seek it intently. Referring once more to the bird, Tartt writes:

> Because - what if that particular goldfinch ... had never been captured or born into captivity, displayed in some household where the painter Fabritius was able to see it? It can never have understood why it was forced to live in such misery: bewildered by noise, distressed by smoke, barking dogs, cooking smells, teased by drunkards and children, tethered to fly on the shortest of chains. Yet even a child can see the dignity: thimble of bravery, all fluff and brittle bone. Not timid, not even hopeless, but steady and holding its place. Refusing to pull back from the world.[54]

Little prisoner. Dignified. Vulnerable. Thimble of bravery. In many respects artists are this bird, grittily refusing to pull back from the world. And not even hopeless.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. The concept of grit offers two perspectives of artistry.
2. Most obviously, it speaks of the capacity to stare down adversity and to endure. The breakthrough stories of artists such as J.K. Rowling serve as examples here.
3. Grit is also about honour and morality; figuring out your principles and sticking to these. Vignettes from the work of Bob Dylan and Neil Young are used to illustrate.
4. Finally, this chapter examines the role of grit in mediating the potentially conflicting influences of political and economic power.

SECTION TWO

CHAPTER TWO – Artistic Grit

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[36] As an exemplar of Type-A perfectionism, the epic recording of Spirit is dwarfed by Steely Dan's Gaucho (1980), which took twice as long (and the sanity of many of its major role players). Gaucho obliterated the artistry of this group, and it took 14 years before they considered further collaborative work.

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