Roy Goddard
Ansgar Allen

Educated People



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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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Risking
Education



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Part I

Writing, Speech, and Silence

The sense of language as a limitation on human understanding, language as constructive of, as controlling, what might be thought or said, no doubt has a long history. There seems, however, to have been an intensification of interest in the formative and restrictive nature of language in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory spurred structuralism's ambition to rethink everything in terms of linguistics: the early Wittgenstein said that the limits of his language were the limits of his world, and Michel Foucault, despite his skepticism about language's role in shaping the subject and its relation to the world, managed to produce, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, a view of the production and maintenance of knowledge and understanding as (almost) entirely governed by preexisting discursive formations (not — note — structures).

§

Antonin Artaud saw the language of modern times and that of conventional theater in particular as a set of stale and ultimately

oppressive banalities that sustain a devitalized, decaying sociality. It is clear that he viewed language in general as a screen separating us from the authentic forms of human experience. Words, he said, "have become fossilized, […] frozen, straitjacketed by their meanings […]. [I]n view of their clearly defined, limited terminology, words are made to stop thought, to surround it, to complete it — in short they are only a conclusion."[1] A theater of violently juxtaposed movement and sound, of "wild […] spontaneous life," a theater employing mime, gesture, dance, and sensory assault, devoid of dialogue, could return meaning to a demoralized culture.[2] He was opposed to contemporary theater's narrow focus on psychology, the pinning down with precise words of the thoughts and feelings of characters, their motivations, their inner worlds — a process of confinement, reduction through logical conceptualization, that misses the range of expressiveness and the expansive sensibility of gesture, movement, and symbol. Words must be reunited with their physical, affective aspects. Artaud was anti-oedipal. Just as writing shrivels the possibilities of expression, so the apparatus of taboo and repression, the oedipal law of the father, controls what it is to be fully human ("whole"). The forbidden pulsions of desire need to be unleashed and this will involve theater presenting desecration, orgy, violence, and their release and expression in symbolic forms.

Artaud, ill and misdiagnosed nearly all his life, subjected to electroshock therapy against his will, was ultimately reduced to a condition that has been described as schizophrenic. His impact on theater has been profound.[3]

§

1 Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Victor Corti (Alma Classics, 2020), 85.

2 Ibid., 5.

3 Susan Sontag claimed that serious theater in the Western world could be said "to divide into two periods — before Artaud and after Artaud." Susan Sontag, *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings* (University of California Press, 1976), xxxviii.

The Canadian philosopher Paul Churchland, drawing on the findings of neuroscience, has argued that the idea of language as the elementary, the basic, medium of thought, consciousness, and knowledge acquisition, is mistaken. Language yields to cognition a very partial representation of the reality (or "information") that is taken in by the brain, it only allows expression of a fraction of the "truth," of the cognitive activity occurring in the brain. Churchland looks forward to a time when everyday language will be replaced by a language, "entirely distinct from natural language," that avails itself of the full machinery of the brain's neural architecture. He goes on to ask why, if two separate hemispheres of a brain can learn to communicate, two distinct brains shouldn't learn to do so and presents the possibility that a neural pathway, "a transducer," might be implanted in the brain at a site which would convert the "symphony" of neural activity into "(say) microwaves radiated from an aerial in the forehead" in order to convert the microwaves into neural activity. Once such a commissure is established two or more people could learn to exchange information and coordinate behavior "with the same intimacy and virtuosity displayed by [an individual's] cerebral hemispheres." Churchland imagines the benefits that such a transformation would bring to team sports, ballet dancing, and "research teams."[4]

§

Churchland's enthusiasm for admitting the fullness of sensory stimulation to our brains, at present rationed by the miser language, calls to mind a comment of George Eliot's:

> If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's

4 Paul M. Churchland, "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes," *The Journal of Philosophy* 78, no. 2 (1981): 87–88.

heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.[5]

§

There is an interesting contrast between the purposes expressed in the thoughts of the madman Artaud and those of the analytic neurophilosopher Churchland. Artaud sees a world in need of vital regeneration and transformation, where Churchland sees the world as in need of smartening up, becoming a more fun and efficient version of what it already is, the kind of liberal, bourgeois place enjoyed by educated people, only one where research teams would come up with ever more precisely informative results. *(And team sports would be reduced to deadlock.)*

§

Harold Pinter said, apparently facetiously, that his plays were about the weasel under the cocktail cabinet.[6]

§

Pinter went on to say, "I have mixed feelings about words myself. Such a weight of words confronts us day in, day out, words spoken in a context such as this, words written by me and by others, the bulk of it a stale dead terminology; ideas endlessly repeated and permutated become platitudinous, trite, meaningless."[7]

§

And, "There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed.

5 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (W.W. Norton, 2000), 124.
6 Harold Pinter, *Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics 1948–1998* (Faber and Faber, 1998), 31.
7 Harold Pinter, *Harold Pinter Plays One* (Methuen, 1967), 13.

This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness."[8]

§

Italo Calvino's books are often described as celebrations of storytelling. It is, however, possible to read them differently. In *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* he presents a group of medieval travelers who, after journeying through a dark wood, arrive at a castle and find that they have lost the power of speech. (Calvino's most widely admired book, *Invisible Cities*, involves exchanges between Marco Polo and China's Mongol emperor Kublai Khan, concerning cities visited by Marco Polo. For most of the novel neither can speak the other's language.) In order to communicate with each other the travelers use a tarot pack to combine cards and use the images and narratives they represent in such a way as to tell their own stories, their personal histories. The participants draw upon their knowledge of the cultural archetypes and narratives made available by the cards to produce a version of the truth of each teller's experience. This is not an easy or stress-free undertaking. Later in the book Calvino expands the mytheme hoard to take in stories and characters from literature and art, most notably from William Shakespeare, but also from stories bequeathed by the likes of Sigmund Freud and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In a note at the end of the book he says that he wrote it to be free of it and its "diabolical" enthrallments.[9] He wonders what he contributed through the exercise, what personal freight and meaning any writer delivers. He has dug into

8 Ibid., 14–15

9 Italo Calvino, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, trans. William Weaver (Vintage, 1977), 126.

"a subsoil which belongs to the species, or at least to a civilization, or at least to certain income brackets" and, like a juggler, moved around a number of objects — scenes and images — to achieve "a certain number of effects."[10] There is more than a suggestion that it is this vast, unasked for, irresistible inheritance of mythemes, archetypes, and narratives that he wants to finish with. Here is a prison or a maze around which the writer, the thinker, Calvino (but it could be any of us), is condemned to wander, confronting and being oppressed by endlessly repeated, timeworn but indestructible scenes and dramas which machine-like endlessly flow into and out of each other, unstoppably recycling the stock of meanings which is the inheritance of the western world.

Origins, Prohibitions, Transgressions, the Body

"It is clear that we are sorry we came from life, from meat, from a whole bloody mess," writes Georges Bataille.[11]

§

According to Bataille there were two transgressions. The first was when human beings detached themselves from nature and stood alone, apart from an immensity, aware of their freedom (and perhaps awed by what they had, no doubt unintentionally, done). This moment was connected to work, all that humanity can do not simply to ensure its survival but to shape the world to its own purposes. Work, at once humankind's bane and its most heroized undertaking, came into being at this moment. This was also the moment when humanity secured its difference, its apartness from the animal world, by subjecting itself to certain prohibitions — notably the incest taboo, but also

10 Ibid., 103–5.

11 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share,* Vols. II & III, trans. Robert Hurley (Zone Books, 2017), 63.

prohibitions concerning bodily function, such as excrement and menstrual fluid which become objects of horror and revulsion, something to be set apart and hidden from the everyday functioning of life. With this initial transgression humanity also came to a conscious relishing of the sexual act, a freedom from the sexual cycles binding the animal world, but a consciousness which introduced a possible unruliness that might threaten social order, a threat that called for systems of constraint and interdiction. In such practical restrictions we may discern the origins of later regulatory codifications relating to sexual behavior, such as the biblical Ten Commandments' forbidding of adultery and covetousness toward your neighbor's wife *(or donkey)*. (This initial great prohibition is where we might locate the origins of those law codes, to be found in the Bible and in other documents of antiquity, concerning respect for property. In the moment of the first transgression, we have the stirrings of one of the most exacting of laws governing personal and social conduct in modernity — possessive individualism.) A third set of limiting behaviors related to death — the treatment of the dead, their veneration, and their role in opening human consciousness to matters of extinction and the void. Bataille does not quite say that alongside the exultation and affirmation that humanity experiences in unchaining itself from the bondage of animal life comes a dread, guilt at what it has enacted and a sense of wounding exclusion from that forever forsaken natural immensity, humanity's entry into what Bataille termed a discontinuous being (expulsion from the Garden).

§

The second transgression brings into being the creature we are. It is the instant when the prohibitions that secure our separation from animal reality are violated, and we revisit that immense "anterior reality" to savor contact with our prior animality. Always, however, we are conscious of the impossibility of an actual return, while simultaneously aware of the unprecedented power that has broken the natural limits imposed upon human-

ity and has, in this act of self-creation, added to anterior existence. "[M]ore secretly still," humanity senses itself as "master of everything," capable of bringing the totality of existence into being, through communicating with it and by representing it symbolically.[12] In this way it has the illusion of bringing that totality under its control — all this in order to experience joy and to confront fear.

§

We know that there was a time before wealth was accumulated, a time before luxury, a time when tools were valued for their utility and for the satisfactions, the pleasures they could enable. This was a time perhaps before trade, before plunder, but not, perhaps, before leisure and celebration, not before exuberant immersion in joy. As far as is known, hierarchies existed as simple, shallow arrangements that were convenient and pragmatic, rather than the steeply gradated orderings that came later, the social architectures that exude the threat and glamor of power.

§

These people we call hunter-gatherers no doubt organized divisions of labor, but the means and disposal of such production as they required would have been held in common. The benefits of their labors were, it seems, shared according to need. People had their possessions — the clothing they wore, the implements necessary for their toil, and, one assumes, items of personal decoration and display and perhaps objects possessing a significance that would have been precious to individuals, invested with meanings validated by their community and its beliefs. Fear and dread would have been part of the existence of these people. Fear would have derived from awareness of their puniness before the threat of other creatures, ferocious preda-

12 Maurice Blanchot, "The Birth of Art," in *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford University Press, 1997), 6.

tors who lived alongside them, and dread would have been occasioned by the enfolding inscrutability, the uncommunicating vastness of the lands, the seas, and the skies, their strange repetitions and violent unpredictabilities. Being people and not like other creatures they would have striven to understand how this all-encompassing otherness was organized in order to anticipate and to prepare for adversity. Such effort at understanding would have been an attempt at control over events, and it is possible that there were other efforts at manipulation of the world in which they lived, through sacrifice, perhaps, and through dance, song, ritual, and ecstatic experience, although we do not know to what extent these earliest people identified the natural forces that governed their lives as being in need of propitiation and susceptible to human influence.

We rightly no longer think of these ancient, aboriginal people, those who seemingly sprang from the earth, who, over eons or suddenly, detached themselves from the order imposed by nature and emerged from "the long biological night"[13] as noble savages. The life they devised was free of the exactions, the diseases, and baroque social irrationalities that marked the ways of life that developed out of the succeeding agrarian and industrial societies. And yet it must have been the case that the deep paleolithic was not an age of innocence, that the seeds of the ills and delusions that have infected subsequent organizations of humanity — what we refer to proudly as our civilizations — were there in the simplest of human communities. There were, as we have noted, divisions of labor and the germs of thoughts of personal property and individual distinctiveness that would be fertile ground for the flourishing of gender and caste inequities and the lethal animosities and structured violences of the modern world.[14]

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13 Italo Calvino, *Mr. Palomar*, trans. William Weaver (Vintage, 1999), 74.

14 See "The Violence of the Letter: From Lévi-Straus to Rousseau," in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 101–40, in which Derrida deploys the notion of an arche-writing that uses all the resources for social and psycho-

§

We have seen that in Bataille's account humanity's first great transgression was to escape the rule of nature, to free itself from that subjugation. We became human by denying our animality, expressing "the repugnance felt for his condition by the animal that became human."[15] The accompanying achievement was to install the prohibitions that preserve our separateness from animality. These subsequent taboos or prohibitions involving excreta, menstrual blood, childbirth, nakedness, and death (putrefaction) were designed to maintain this distance from animality. The second transgression was to dare to disobey those prohibitions. Both prohibitions and acts of their violation have less than straightforward consequences.

We should be wary of creating a heroic narrative of ascent to humanity. These three moments — emergence from unself-conscious immersion in nature, the institution of taboos, and the transgression of those proscriptions — may be seen as involuntary occurrences. In the first case the emergence of the self-consciousness that distinguishes us from animals may be considered a development triggered by environmental circumstances which at present can only be speculated on. The second development can be characterized as a series of pragmatic responses to a fear of reabsorption into the natural realm — a reactive rather than affirmative determination. The breaking of taboo can be taken as a temporary reversion to animality, which is to say it is impelled by instinctual drives rather than human will. What remains the case, however, is that what Bataille offers is an account of the progression of the genus *Homo* into a particular kind of emancipation and opening onto possibility that is unique to just one species on our planet.

§

logical violence and manipulation that Lévi-Straus and Rousseau identify with actual writing. There was never an age of human innocence.

15 Bataille, *The Accursed Share,* Vols. II & III, 61.

Maurice Blanchot, looking at the 17,000-year-old paintings of aurochs, mastodons, and deer in the caves of Lascaux, sees a repetition of an aboriginal impulse to expression. This is what art does: it brings humanity into communication, "at a distance and yet immediate," with the joyfulness and the terrors of its act of originating transgression.[16] This is a conception of art as the sublime, of art as the fundamental action of humanity, art as what Jean-François Lyotard wearisomely feels he has to call the avant-garde, art as an act of repeated transgression.[17] Art is a recurring impulse, never bringing in itself anything new. Its instantiations through human history are particular moments which bring humanity into contact with the terrors, the anxieties, and the affirmative joys of its being.

§

Bataille was much taken up with filth — excrement, bodily fluids, the internal soft machine of our bodies. He wonders why we see these things as disgusting, repugnant. Nakedness too is shameful. We're sorry we came from life, from a bloody mess. (One thinks of how some people faint — fall into unconsciousness — at the sight of blood.) This abhorrence has to be taught, forced into our children in order to tear them away from nature, from the animality we left behind somewhere in the Lower Paleolithic. "Mankind as a whole," he writes, "resembles those parvenus who are ashamed of their humble origin."[18] Where culture — religion, philosophy, humanist art — sees the human being engaged in a journey to the perfection of its nobility, its spirituality, Bataille sees only a horror of flesh as an aboriginal human urge and perhaps a kind of aboriginal bourgeois impulse.

§

16 Blanchot, "The Birth of Art," 6.

17 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Polity Press, 1991), 103–7.

18 Bataille, *The Accursed Share,* Vols. II & III, 62.

Béla Tarr said of his masterwork, *The Turin Horse*, that he wanted the film to suggest the heaviness of human life. What is it that confers this heaviness? Humanity's wrenching away from an instinctual being, the adoptions of tools, clothing, fire, thinking about what-may-happen, what-has-to-happen if consciousness, consciousness of death and the full horror of all the many ways in which that death might be brought about, the forestalling of death, all the planning and thinking necessary to the delay of death, its inevitable arrival soon or in the future, all that needs to be done every day, repetitiously and again and again, to survive and not just to survive, but to quell, to calm what we all know, the horror at the vastness opened up by consciousness, the echoing emptiness and lethality of the universe surrounding us and seeping in to our souls, an unimaginable yet violent void that returns no answer to any address, not even an echo of our voices. Work, routine, order, regulation, play, art, song, storying, dreaming the supernatural, the attempted humanization of the cosmos, the protective layers we gather around ourselves which are the same as the burdens we assume, the insulating heaviness that enfolds and eventually breaks us.

The Universe Is Something Like a Spider or Spit

> [H]uman life cannot in any way be limited to the closed systems assigned to it by reasonable conceptions. The immense travail of recklessness, discharge, and upheaval that constitutes life could be expressed by stating that life starts only with the deficit of these systems.[19]

§

In the 1930s, Bataille defined a notion he called *l'informe,* the formless or formlessness:

19 Georges Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Blackwell, 1997), 179–80.

> [*F*]*ormless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless*, amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.[20]

For Bataille, this base matter — the material from which the stars, the planets, rocks, dust and oceans, living organisms and human beings and their feelings and thoughts are composed — is fissile, volatile, and not given to order. It lacks the form that "academic men" wish to impose upon the world and its objects. It is this essential (and horrifying) formlessness that underlies humanity's urge to bring things — the world, the universe, our social being — to order. Humanity seeks to rise above this matter, to escape it, to escape the fact that we are made of this stuff which we designate as inhuman, disgusting, and deserving of abomination. It is our bodies which betray the fact of our origin and it is the bodily — "the whole bloody mess" — that becomes the focus of our disgust, the motor of our impulse to expel all that is base in our being. Thus the abject, that which cannot be accepted as human. As we have seen, Bataille traces the origins of the abhorrent to our separation from nature, from animality. Animals do not abject; they have no notion of the abject. The abject and abjection are a product of the defenses we set up (and then transgress) as conscious beings, the prohibitions and taboos we have to erect in order to maintain our apartness from animality, our status as non-animals. We are,

20 Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 31.

however, as fascinated as we are horrified by what lies across the boundary we have set up to protect and preserve our integrity as sovereign beings, our social organization, the order we think of as civilization. And, of course, we do not see that animality as it is, but through the perversions of a gaze filled with fear and desire. Bataille, then, sees this mix of revulsion and longing as producing the human urge toward having everything classified, ordered, and tidied up, a movement away from, above, and beyond the messiness of lived and subjective experience to realms of uncontaminated knowledge. These are the projects, as he sees them, of philosophy and science, reducing the truth of existence to objective knowledge. He does not deny the usefulness in its own sphere of the scientific method, but he does refuse its claim to account for the reality or dismiss the significance of inner experience:

> A study that sets out to be scientific minimizes the part played by subjective experience, while I on the other hand am methodically minimizing that played by objective experience.[21]

If questioning — inquiry — is the critical inspection of, the going back over, what went before, base matter is the necessary end point of questioning what we are and what we might be.

§

The concept of base matter undoes our ideas of pure and impure, debasement and elevation, body and mind. As importantly, it denies the possibility of firm and final foundations, the project of a final determination, a completion of the human.

§

21 Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (Penguin, 2012), 99.

Two Hungarian scholars urge

> the pressing need to develop alternatives to the new hygienic norms instituted by the paradigms of the cyborg, synthetic biology, the anthropology of prosthesis and implants, and "materials as machines." For the fantasy-regimes of digital materialism are not the continuation of the modernist dialectic of materialism and idealism, nor of the virtual and material from a long time ago; in their case, we could instead talk about the power politics of hygiene and the new aesthetics of sterility which are completely eliminating the realm of impurity, baseness, and filth. The material fantasies of the digital are creating a systematic hypochondria, whereby hyper-sterile spheres are constantly threatened by the idea of base materialism.[22]

§

One inevitably thinks of the project of transhumanism, which is defined on the website *Posthumanism* as the view that humans should develop the technological means for "the exploration of the posthuman realm of possible modes of being" in order to overcome the biological constraints that impose limitations on thought, emotions, enjoyment, health, and longevity.[23] Three aspirations seem to preoccupy transhumanist thought: (1) freeing humanity (or, in the more individualist lexicon of contemporary transhumanism, the individual self) from the suffering, the violence, and the physical enslavement of incarnation (or, in a variation that is well represented on the internet, the inhibitory constraints imposed on sexual activity); (2) the horror of death; and (3) the aspiration that governs these first two — to bring about union with the Real, entry into the ultimate truth of

22 Zsolt Miklósvölgyi and Márió Z. Nemes, "Base Matters," *Medium,* December 3, 2016, https://medium.com/@technologieunddasunheimliche/base-matters-a1aaa0d36f8c.

23 "Posthumanism," http://www.posthumanism.com/.

things. Sex, death, the Real. Matter is corruption and incarceration of desire/spirit/reason and must be escaped, a digitalized variant of an ancient disdain of the body, of matter, and a longing for deliverance from the compulsions and limitations of embodied existence.

§

And then there's the similarly haunted aspiration, currently possessing several multi-billionaires, for escape from Earth through settlement on another planet, perhaps the moon, more likely Mars, that is to say, escape from the entangled problems of an uncomplying biosphere to existence on an almost (so enticing!) *dead* world, inside a sterile, obedient artificial environment, sealed off from whatever unpleasantnesses that world might present.

§

The question is prompted as to what Bataille does with abjection? His accounts, whether presented through argument or fiction, suggest something that's more like an attempt to overcome proprieties, prohibitions if you like, by wallowing in the shameful, the perverse, rather than any attempted revisiting of a natural state. Animals, remember, aren't depraved. A critic might observe that his view of the erotic at times seems closer to transgression of the bourgeois commandments that are the territory of Freudian psychoanalysis — *épater la bourgeoisie* — rather than a reckoning with our animality.

§

Julia Kristeva draws upon Freud and Jacques Lacan in asserting that entry into the social order is only possible once the child enters the system of language, the system which Lacan referred to as the social institution on which all other institutions are

based.[24] Language is the medium through which human beings communicate with others and are able to conduct through symbolization their relationship to the world and to others. At the same time language stands between the subject and the direct experience of things, marking the impossibility of an unmediated relationship with the world. The Oedipus complex is the stage at which the child identifies a rival, a more powerful figure, the Father, threatening the loss of the immediate satisfaction of desire which the child enjoys within the closed mother–child dyad. Within the Freudian–Lacanian conceptualization this crisis is resolved by the child identifying with the same-sex parent and resigning itself to the father's authority — the Law of the Father — thus gaining entry into the symbolic order, into language and the conventions, the morality and institutions of society. This progression marks (and effectuates) the rift, the unbridgeable rift, between the Real of existence and the realm of human social order.

Kristeva offers some nuance to Bataille's idea of prohibition. For her the abject is pre-oedipal, prior to language. Within abjection there lurks a violent, dark revolt of being, something that is neither outside nor inside, neither object nor subject, unthinkable, intolerable, impossible, something that cannot be assimilated. It is neither something repressed nor anything to do with desire. It can't be faced as an object which can be defined. It can't be named. Not an object but firmly opposed to *I*.

An object can be recognized within a relation that enables *I* to search for meaning. The abject is a "jettisoned object" drawing *I* to a place where meaning is not possible. The abject does not submit to the ego/superego's rules, but it is never quiet, ceaselessly challenging the regulations of rational consciousness, always disturbing what is settled between ego and superego. Monstrous, uncanny, but unignorable, it draws *I* to a region of

24 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Léon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982).

meaninglessness, a terrifying reality threatening "non-existence and hallucination," against which, strangely, it is a safeguard.[25]

The abject, then, is the detritus resulting from the oedipal attempt to separate from the mother, an effort at repression that is commanded by, as Kristeva puts it, the ego/superego which cannot tolerate the abomination of the inhuman, the bestial. The abject is what we inherit from our time before entry into the symbolic order, entry into the world ordered by reason and entrenched power. It is a residue that cannot be incorporated within that settlement; it is all that disturbs our sense of ourselves as independent, sovereign beings. It threatens what the symbolic order offers — "the fragile texture of a desire for meaning."[26] It draws toward a place where meaning collapses. It "disturbs identity, system. Order."[27] Abjection is "culturally prior to sin."[28] It is the memory, the trace of what we experienced before we entered language. It is not the Other of other people, our neighbors, our friends, strangers in whom we occasionally glimpse unknowable depths, an abyssal otherness, nor is it the Other of authority, the weight of the Law that enters our sovereign selves, commands obedience to social norms, to an ethical regulation, and induces guilt or shame for our real or imagined violations of that code.

It is the discarded awareness of our origin as expelled, (r)ejected from our mother's body, our source in nature, from the prior smothering immersion in a purposeless swamp of being, an undifferentiated instinctivism, a mire whose existence mocks the structurings of civilized order, casting hope, freedom, progress, and justice as fantasies conjured by the oedipal settlement, by the societal law that creates the delusion of meaningfulness. And we feel shame and learn loathing for that origin, that muck. And we feel horror because we know that the one

25 Ibid., 1–2.
26 Ibid., 1.
27 Ibid., 4.
28 Ibid., 17.

sure fact about nature is that it leads to death. It forces us up against what Freud suggested,[29] that the aim of all life is death.

The abject is perverse in its workings and effects in that it recognizes prohibition, rule, and law but denies them, corrupts and depraves them. It is what provokes the rigor, the severity of religion, morality, and law.[30] The exclusions (particular foods, sexual practices or relations, relations to the dead) then set up the idea of the sacred, that which is pursued beyond, above, away from the abject. The history of religions is the history of the attempted purification of the abject (something Bataille upturns by locating the sacred within base experience).

Kristeva's rigorously Freudian–Lacanian account is consistent with Bataille's thinking, although she traces the historical mutations of abjection and its prohibitions through the Neolithic period, the societies of the monotheisms, to the Christian codification of that relationship. She offers a particularity that is absent in Bataille. Her clear identification of the presymbolic origin of the abject and its distinction from the sinfulness incurred upon violation of the Law — the norms, interdictions, and commands imposed by the oedipal settlement — usefully complicates the notion of what is involved in transgression — whether a breaking of a primal prohibition, imposed on our entry into humanity, is involved, or a transgression of the codes put in place by a later and particular social order. Bataille's emphasis on the fleetingness, the necessary failure of all such transgressions, remains important, however, insofar as all attempts to travel into this indeterminate zone must fail from the perspective of discontinuous beings and will deliver experiences of excess which can never adequately be communicated upon one's return. Kristeva, in turn, brings emphasis to the threat from the abject to the "fragile" meaningfulness provided by such social and moral subjection. Sinning against a societal morality does

29 Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Vol. 18: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works (1917–1919),* ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud (Vintage, 2001).

30 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 16.

not call into question the structuring and stability of that society whereas the transgression that involves a revisiting of animality casts doubt on the validity, the claims of civilization, the projects of reason. Kristeva doesn't contest the necessity of the oedipal subjection, but she takes its origins back to the mother, not as an object of desire for the (male) child but as an unconscious memory of their emergence from nature. She improves Bataille, who seems to have no thought about the psychological detail of that separation, except that it is recalled as horrific and makes up the sense of the abject that we all have.

§

If the history of religions is the history of the attempted purification of the abject, it ends, Kristeva says, "with that catharsis par excellence called art." The artistic experience is rooted in the abject, seeking to go back to the primal repression, that "bottomless primacy" that founded the speaking being, the symbolizing being, to the boundary of the thinkable, the assimilable. Art is the "essential component of religiosity" which always survives the collapse of religions. [31]

Art takes us to what we sense might be. It takes us to the boundary of the knowable and unknowable, to the edge of what we know as our being, to an edge beyond which there is an unknown that we feel we might know or perhaps ought to know. Art unsettles our understanding of who we are and what we might be. There are settled, if uneasy, understandings of these matters. Religions have such answers, as do some philosophies, but art is what remains if the hold and reassurance of religion and philosophy dies away. Art approaches the sublime, the ineffable, and confronts us with what we might call a Real, an underlying reality, that throws all that we regard as solid into doubt. In doing this it can terrify and it can exalt. It seems that art brings us close to the great unthinking immersion in Nature, a bottomless state of primacy that fascinates and horrifies us,

31 Ibid., 17–18.

and it can as well confront us with the vast uncommunicating vacancy, the massive indifference of the universe, that so terrified Pascal.

If art has a positive function it is to force us, or to lure us, toward an honesty concerning who we are and what we might be and thus to reframe, to revivify, to excite our sense of ourselves and our possibilities as human beings.

§

As is well known there is a widely held idea that humanity is engaged on a progression toward a condition of civility which is relentlessly reducing cruelty, poverty, ignorance, ill-health, unhappiness, and social inequality — all that diminishes the status and dignity of the human being. This is an assumption built into modern societies whether they are wealthy or suffering near destitution — for the former such progress appears to be observable, for the latter it is something that ought to be happening, something to be striven toward. There are obstacles in the way, such as certain kinds of religiosity which lure focus from present satisfactions toward justice and fulfillment in a life after death; there are entrenchments of power and wealth which resist the arc of the moral universe; there are the catastrophes which have throughout human history produced misery and despair, some of them the natural events that have always plagued humanity, some of them the result of human ignorance, stupidity, or venality. But the common sense — that half-formed, half-conscious mode of thought — of global modernity is that things can be fixed, ought to be fixed, and, it is to be hoped, will be fixed. For many among the educated classes, however, this is more than a commonsense aspiration. It is a deeply embedded presumption, a justification, a *raison d'être,* for the work that they do.

The educated have many instantiations. They include those who have acquired formal recognition of their intellectual achievement — obviously, university academics in the humanities and sciences are one such group (a disparate one) — but the educated may be found across society, in the civil service,

for example, in some areas of journalism, among professional politicians, in the commentariat spread across the media, and in the research institutes, consultancies, charities, and pressure groups that seek influence on the ways in which society is organized and run. The educated person may also be found outside these environments. An essential characteristic of such persons is that they feel that through their work they are contributing — or have contributed — to the progressive improvement of the human lot. They believe that, whatever its flaws, they are involved in something that is essentially good or that contributes to the common share of knowledge. Of course, in all of the settings outlined above there will be people who don't subscribe to this ethic of virtue: pragmatists unencumbered by matters of principle; others — cynics, if you like — who don't believe that anything is really going to work out; skeptics who haven't bought the line about essential good; and others who don't really trouble themselves with longer-term questions but who are quite pleased to have a reasonably comfy job where they can do the stuff they want to do. In the progressively minded terms suggested above, such people would not be included among the educated, if to be educated is to have been gathered into the idea that humanity is, through the application of reason to social problems, engaged on a progress to human betterment. And yet, the attitudes of the "enlightened" and apparently unshockable cynic, or the calculating pragmatist, or the smug or assured negativity of the skeptic, all betray traces of the elevation, or the self-regard, which also constitute the educated, and carry with it the effects of the social status of the bourgeois outlook in particular. Education, it will be remembered, was for early Enlightenment thinkers the key instrument for humanity to free itself of ignorance, irrationality, and unquestioning subservience to authority. In its modern forms the practice of education and the condition of educatedness retain these (now somewhat dilapidated) commitments. We, the writers of this text, are not sure that we can be counted as educated people, although we are aware that this might just be wishful thinking.

§

What are the harms contingent on the common sense that governs our civilization? What could there be to criticize in this good thing, this endeavor at progress toward a just society within which human beings, living in freedom, might achieve their full potential?

Had the idea that enchanted Immanuel Kant and other Enlightenment philosophers persisted at a theoretical level untouched by the wilder and less decorous human desires, it might have passed into history as an interesting moment in thought, an imagining destined to failure by its underestimation of the place of unreason in human life. But persist it did, through entanglement with the two major forces of modern civilization — capitalism and the powers unleashed by scientific reason, with the result that the ideas and aspirations of progress and human fulfillment do not present themselves to us in their full and icy philosophical splendor. They meet us in the guise of a radically regulatory capitalism. In existing societies to progress, to be free, to be fulfilled is understood and evaluated in terms of commodification. We judge whether we are getting ahead (making progress) in terms of our level of material wealth; we value our freedom to manage our lives according to the expectations determined by our level of financial prosperity; what we deserve and what we desire is shaped and organized by the enveloping normality of capitalism, which ceaselessly works to contain our appetites and their satisfaction within the logic of economic liberalism. Capitalism doesn't have any intention of reasoning us out of our irrational, passional commitments; rather, it aims to hijack our attachments to family and community, our human bias to simple solutions, our need for pleasure, our enmities — human desire reduced to reassuringly cartoon forms. By way of what has been called capitalism's publicity arm — advertising — family is sentimentalized as the hub of happy and rewarding consumption; competition is threaded through the industries of culture — entertainment, the circuses of sport: drama.

Sex, Love, Hypermorality

The Equality Network, a Scottish national organization working for LGBTQIA+ rights, said this in July 2013:

> marriage is seen by many as the gold standard for celebrating the joy of love and commitment. Marriage is very widely understood for its symbolism and its personal, community, and in some cases religious significance.[32]

Psychology Today, in December 2013, offered a list "in a romantic context" of essential characteristics of a loving relationship:

> Expressions of affection, both physical and emotional; a wish to offer pleasure and satisfaction to another; tenderness, compassion, and sensitivity to the needs of the other; a desire for shared activities and pursuits; an appropriate level of sharing of possessions; an ongoing, honest exchange of personal feelings; the process of offering concern, comfort, and outward assistance for the loved one's aspirations.[33]

Freud had a different view, describing romantic love as a delusionary state, heavily inflected by narcissism.

§

Bataille, writing about literature:

32 "Why Is Same Sex Marriage Important?," *Equality Network,* https://www.equality-network.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Why-is-same-sex-marriage-important.pdf.

33 Lisa Firestone, "What It Really Means to Be in Love," *Psychology Today,* December 18, 2012, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/compassion-matters/201312/what-it-really-means-be-in-love.

> I believe that the evil […] which it expresses has a sovereign value for us. But this concept does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a 'hypermorality'.[34]

Leo Bersani thinks about love through a reading of Jean Genet's novel *Funeral Rites*.[35] He focuses on Genet's spectacularly transgressive claim that during World War II he betrayed his lover, Jean Decarnin, a French resistance fighter, to the police and, to compound the treachery, demanded payment for the act. Bersani concedes that it is difficult to put together any sort of moral defense for Genet's apparently baffling actions (or claims), but proceeds to do so. He describes Genet's project in this novel, and across his writing, as a revolt, a "revolt that has no relation whatsoever to the laws, categories, and values it would contest and, ideally, destroy,"[36] which is to say that Genet seeks, not simply to recuperate, to "humanize" these values, to gain acceptance for homosexuality, but to entirely refuse the terms of the dominant (hetero) culture, to lay waste to that culture's structures of oppression, the tyrannical power relations imposed by bourgeois society. Bersani sees Genet's account of betrayal, a monstrous act in conventional terms, as an extreme instance of the radical homo-ness that offers an alternative to the moral turpitude of "lawful" society. This is "[b]etrayal [as] an ethical necessity,"[37] a necessarily violent response and a first step on the way to release from the values and institutions of bourgeois society, that ethical framework which serves to oppress and violate subjugated communities and — Bersani's central point — to deform social relations generally. He reads Genet's project of transgressive sexuality as proposing a way out of the warped subjectivities produced by hetero culture's figuring of the social, of relationality.

Bersani argues that the multiple, impersonal sexual encounters of a certain kind of (male) homosexuality represent a rejec-

34 Georges Bataille, "Preface," in *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (Marion Boyars, 1997), 1.

35 Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Harvard University Press, 1995).

36 Ibid., 152.

37 Ibid., 155.

tion of or turning away from a desire grounded in lack. Heterosexual desire seeks the incorporation of the other and the other's desire to make good a deficiency "through the incorporation of difference."[38] He presents homosexual desire as essentially narcissistic, a narcissism which does not seek absorption of the other, but which is tolerant of psychological difference, of psychological otherness, because it is entirely indifferent to difference, seeking only an intensification of the same, "a desire in others of what we already are."[39] In refusal of conventional, bourgeois/humanist orthodoxy, he identifies the demand of hetero sex, hetero love, for intimate knowledge of the other, as an intolerant, predatory desire. This form of desire establishes a sanctity of personhood, a toxic selfhood, which, he seems to suggest, produces the psychological violences, the warring that results, as he sees it, in the social incoherence and political-economic barbarism of our age. Bersani floats the possibility that "the universal freemasonry" of "homo-ness," "a radical queer community," might be a model, a prompt, for rethinking "what might be valuably human in the human community" as a whole.[40] The individual in such a community, the individual indifferent to difference, unengaged by the phantasmatics of personhood, "disappears in his or her desire, a desire that seeks more of the same, partially dissolving subjects by extending them into a communal homo-ness."[41]

§

Genet refuses to give loyalty to any social or political project, whether it be morally impeccable in conventional terms or transgressively evil. He aims to raise vice, the actions of "a traitor, thief, looter, informer, hater, destroyer, despiser, coward"[42] to the level of a system of virtue that he could live by. He "*declin*[*es*]

38 Ibid., 150.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 151.
41 Ibid., 149.
42 Genet, quoted in ibid., 161.

to participate in any sociality at all,"[43] writes Bersani, refusing all communication, all dialogue, because to participate and communicate is to enter, to comply with and become ensnared by a discursive system and its endless policing of its moral binaries, good and evil, treachery and loyalty. The only (one might say *honorable*, were it not such a discredited term in his lexicon) resort available to Genet is to write the destruction of that moral system and to replace it with "the empty value of solitude." An embrace of crime and evil delivers him to solitude — "he embraces crime in order to be alone." Evil is not seen as, or lived as, a transgressing of the socially defined good, but as "a turning away from the entire theater of the good, a surpassing or exceeding of the entire discursive field of good and evil."[44]

Bersani envisages that the narcissism of gay sex might produce its opposite in the social realm — a positive communality, "a disposition towards community"[45] — whereas hetero sex's drive for intimate and private knowledge of the other leads to social and political silos, closeted sectionalisms, and to a social organization that breeds division and injustice.

§

Absolute non-engagement with the dominant terms of conventional culture, as a strategy of revolt, aimed at freedom.

Solitude as a necessary social virtue.

Heterosexual love as a psychotic perversion of relationality.

Evil, as an exceeding of established systems of morality.

And narcissistic desire as a portal to a universal form of human community.

43 Ibid., 168.
44 Ibid., 163.
45 Ibid., 149.

§

Bersani clearly despises the many homosexuals who far from seeking the liquidation of bourgeois morality, instead campaign for same-sex marriage and child-adoption rights and against discrimination in the armed services, wanting urgently to be accepted into the structures of conventional morality, submitting what Bersani calls a "tame demand for recognition"[46] and social inclusion. This is the socially acceptable manner by which the establishment is challenged. Its institutions might need to change their practices, a little, to the extent that they are exclusionary, but they are not themselves to be threatened in any substantial sense.

§

So what is hypermorality? For Bataille evil is a necessity. He uses the term in the sense of what seems evil to bourgeois society or to the Abrahamic religions, the religions of thou shalt and thou shalt not. Evil as a supersession of those codes that aim to bind human desire and to limit what it is to be human. Thus William Blake, Emily Brontë, Charles Baudelaire, and the Marquis de Sade refuse these inhibitions and eulogize their transgression.[47] Similarly, Guy Debord sees humanity as lulled by the spectacle into a passivity that denies the immediacy of experience and that the only moral stance available to radical critique is to refuse all traffic with the (false and demeaning) shibboleths of capitalist modernity. Genet takes an embrace of all that is evil in the conventional terms of hetero morality — a morality that is founded on the Abrahamic codes — right down to the caricature commodification of betrayal. He aims to reveal the character of bourgeois society's central, universal transaction — the exchange of money for services — as an essentially corrupt and corrupting act.

46 Ibid.,161.
47 See Bataille, *Literature and Evil*.

All three — Bataille, Debord, Genet — practice a hypermorality, a going beyond, an exceeding of what passes for socially acceptable morality. Vice is made into virtue.

§

Bersani refers to Judith Butler's project of "expos[ing] all the discursive sites of homophobia" in order to "mark their weakness" and thereby rethink institutions like the family as "authentically caring and enabling communities." He suggests that Genet's "perversely alien perspective" can bring "critical rigor" to this humanizing project, although what appears to this writer as Genet's radical nihilism (this term is used with no pejorative intent) would surely be entirely at odds with Butler's essentially recuperative, therapeutic enterprise.[48] The former's life and work indicate an unrelenting commitment to a Nietzschean affirmation of his desire, a leaping forward into an unknown where self and a moral world will be formed in the image of that desire. Bersani's apparent enlisting of Genet in what appears to be a humanistic endeavor is a point where an ambiguity may be perceived in his text, an indecisiveness, a doubt which threads his argument concerning the nature of Genet's usefulness to the task of recasting human relations.

Bersani focuses on Genet's obsession with rimming, which Bersani reads as imbued with a violent desire to consume, to destroy or be destroyed by the other, either "a murderous ripping into the lover's entrails," or a longing to enter the other's body and to slumber and be consumed, "digested […] from below."[49] For Genet sexual pleasure is founded on "a sterile, treacherous, even murderous relation to others," an erotic exaltation of waste, sterility, and death. Genet's celebration of rimming, according to Bersani, is at once a self-dramatizing, "spectacular transgression" that seeks "gestural beauty," and also something

48 Bersani, *Homos*, 152.
49 Ibid., 158–59.

more radically moral, "a kind of non-relational betrayal."[50] His commitment to remaining outside a social and moral order he disdains, his intent of overturning conventional virtue and raising vice, the actions of "a traitor, thief, looter, informer, hater, destroyer, despiser, coward" to the level of a system of virtue that he could live by. Genet's revolt may still be dependent, as Bersani insists, on the dominant moral discourse, in that the revolt is based on a flouting, and therefore a relation, to conventional morality, but it nevertheless contains the germ notion that "evil" can deliver him, Genet, to "a moral solitude where I would never be joined."[51] It is this idea of solitude as a subjective state, a psychological condition which does not fear or seek to overcome and absorb the other, an indifference to difference, that Bersani identifies as key to reconfiguring the human in human community.

§

Bersani follows other thinkers in his assault on the heterosexually ordered family — among others R.D. Laing, David Cooper, Gilles Deleuze and, less stridently, Michel Foucault — but in one important respect the psychoanalytically engaged figure he has most in common with is Wilhelm Reich in that he identifies sex, the sexual act, as the originating factor in the formation of the social and cultural order. Where Reich eventually arrives at an idea of unfettered sexual activity as liberatory, of sexual repression as being at the root of political oppression, Bersani argues that the most common or habitual practice of heterosexual intercourse — face to face, forming Genet's excluding oval — is formative of the intolerant, repressive, individually and socially incapacitating social-political order we inhabit. He seeks a depressurizing of sex, its simplification to an act of self-fulfillment, a rapture without exchanges, ignoring the injunction to find ourselves in the other, a purely narcissistic, "objectless" encoun-

50 Ibid., 160–61.
51 Genet, quoted in ibid., 162.

ter.[52] Thus Bersani's argument appears to stand or fall on the question of whether there is a "continuity between the sexual and the political,"[53] whether conventional heterosexual coition is productive of social ill and whether the divestment of intimacy, of the search for completion in that encounter, would work to the social good. Putting to one side the matter of how a possibly socially beneficial adjustment in heterosexual love-making might be brought about, it is surely the case that Bersani's argument (necessarily?) ignores the variety of hetero sexual practice. Bersani might respond that he is positing an idealized version of hetero sexual performance, a dangerously, tyrannically normative model that infects the sexual imagination. Fair enough, but the question then offers itself whether this harmfully idealized representation of sex produces a "dangerously overloaded self" and the harsh normativities of conventional sociality or, reversing terms, whether the harmful idealization is the product of a patriarchal, bourgeois social order, a self-interested government of sex by powerful social forces.[54]

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Bersani's (or Bersani's Genet's) urging of absolute nonreciprocity with the terms of conventional culture, a refusal to engage with, to take position within, the dominant moral structures of society, not to speak under the laws of what Foucault saw as the statements governing entry to and participation in systems of knowledge, brings to mind another figure who more rigorously than any other in history adopted a stance and practice of radical noncooperation — the sage of Sinope, Diogenes.

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52 Ibid.,166.
53 Ibid., 171.
54 This what I take to be Foucault's position.

It is interesting to note that while he acknowledged Genet's power as a writer, Bataille (it is no exaggeration to say) despised him — for his lack of interest in communicating with the reader.[55] Genet simply shouts about himself.

The Bourgeoisie, Liberal Democracy, Good Things, and Bad Things

Bourgeoisie, bourgeois — these are slippery terms. It seems that in medieval times you were a bourgeois if you lived in a town. Sometimes "the bourgeoisie" refers to any social class that isn't the working class or the aristocracy, or perhaps it's just the ruling class — or classes. Or just the middle class. According to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels "[t]he bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part."[56] By greatly increasing the urban population it "rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life."[57]

The bourgeoisie "has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades."[58]

Marx's construction of the bourgeoisie as a dominating social stratum has been highly influential. He took the term and developed it to mean the class that owned the means of production (capital and property) and rentiers who didn't have any part in producing goods but made their money from investments or through renting property — "an idle profession" — a class which benefited from an economic system maintained by specific relations of production. These were relations within which the bourgeoisie, stripping away the political and religious veils disguising earlier patriarchal systems of exploitation, installed "na-

55 Bataille, *Literature and Evil,* 193–204.
56 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (Penguin, 2002), 222.
57 Ibid., 224.
58 Ibid., 222.

ked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation."[59] "The bourgeoisie" signified capitalism, the system and all who lived in and profited by it.

The bourgeoisie is not a homogeneous entity. There is for example a *petit*-bourgeoisie and an *haut*-bourgeoisie and, particularly for the French, gradations of bourgeoisness between *petit* and *haut*. There is an imprecision in uses of the term. The petit-bourgeois can be a shopkeeper, an artisan or anyone setting up a small business, but if critics are being especially disdainful the haut-bourgeois may be referred to as the petit-bourgeois.

Raymond Williams notes its use as "a general and often vague term of social contempt."[60] This would be from the upper classes, deriding the lack of culture and the vulgarity, the mediocrity of what the English would think of as the industrial and commercial middle class, but also from radical artists and thinkers who despised the materialism and philistinism of that class. So the bourgeois get it in the neck from different directions.

A vague term of social contempt: the bourgeois can be despised for being philistine, for scorning the fripperies of art and the airy irrelevances of any analysis that goes beyond common sense, or they can be mocked for embracing high culture — art, theater, opera — as a signifier of their social status. The charge sheet: philistine, hypocritical, and middlebrow.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno offer Odysseus (a.k.a. Ulysses) — the great liar — as the archetype of the modern bourgeois, the calculating, self-interested man who through cunning can outwit the gods, which is to say, elude the regulating structures and powers of his day.[61] Odysseus introduces deceit into consciousness — you can fool the gods, you can play the system. About two and a half thousand years later Niccolò Machiavelli wrote this: "[T]here is such a distance between how one lives

59 Ibid.

60 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford University Press, 1983), 45–48.

61 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002).

and how one ought to live, that anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done achieves his downfall rather than his preservation."[62]

Machiavelli was not, of course, addressing the early bourgeoisie, but offering advice about government to a powerful prince: Do what is necessary to serve your own interests and forget about the moral law. However, his assessment of what was required for a prince to rule effectively sits in a lineage from Horkheimer and Adorno's Odysseus to the bourgeoisie of the mid-nineteenth century whose ruthless destruction of the social ties and sentimental affinities — the whole religiously sanctioned social and moral fictions of feudal society — produces a calculative rationality that is bereft of moral concern or social responsibility, leaving "no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.'"[63]

But just who is bourgeois? Marx was clear to whom he was referring, but the term is rarely used with any clear definition outside of Marxist discourse. If, as Marxism would have it, the bourgeois are those who profit from capitalism, as opposed to those who are cheated out of their rightful due, where does that place those who work as, say, teachers, academics, or civil servants? Are doctors and scientists working in publicly funded bodies part of the bourgeoisie? Obviously any of the above who work in the private sector are, in Marx's terms, bourgeois. Yet many who work in education, scientific research, the governmental bureaucracies, including arts bodies, or in the NHS[64] can hardly be said to profit — to get their just economic desserts — from their labors within these institutions, all of which, of course, are sustained by the toil of ancillary, subordinate employees, a laboring cohort that includes cleaners, security staff, porters, office workers, technical support staff, and so on. Within universities, the casualized academics — "adjunct faculty," as

62 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Peter Bondanella (Oxford University Press, 2005), 53.

63 Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 222.

64 The English system of national health care.

they are called in the USA — who undertake much of the burden of teaching, whose employment is insecure, are not of the bourgeoisie, but are part of an exploited underclass.

Stephen Pinker, a cognitive psychologist and linguist who writes about the human condition, likes the bourgeoisie:

> The fact is that the values of the middle class — personal responsibility, devotion to family and neighborhood, avoidance of macho violence, respect for liberal democracy — are good things, not bad things. Most of the world wants to join the bourgeoisie.[65]

So, if you're not bourgeois, which must mean you are — how can we put it? — lower class or (and one would guess this is less likely) a member of the aristocracy, you are irresponsible, you don't care enough about your family or local community, are violent and don't give two hoots for, may even question, the prevailing form of government. We can be grateful to Pinker for this handy distillation of bourgeois fears and prejudices concerning the lower or unruly orders and the reminder of a certain section of the bourgeoisie's commitment to social and political stasis.

It should as well be pointed out that not everyone can join the bourgeoisie, since it is a social and economic category whose identity depends on its distinctiveness from, and the exclusion of, other social groupings who are not bourgeois, those who on balance do not profit from the prevailing liberal democratic order: the productive and unproductive, the unemployed and the employed who are not granted what they deserve for their labor, the millions who eke out a bare existence in a world that has not been designed to include them. A world that has a bourgeoisie must have an exploited and a neglected underclass.

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65 Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (Penguin, 2003), 416.

Marxism provides a clear and simple definition of what it means to be bourgeois and not bourgeois:

> By bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labor. By proletariat, the class of modern wage laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labor power in order to live.[66]

According to this definition Marx and Engels would have qualified as bourgeois, both profiting from capitalist relations of production, Engels supporting the otherwise impoverished Marx family from money derived from helping to run his father's textile factories in Salford and Prussia. What is ignored in such accusations is that both Marx and Engels used their respective privileges (although it is difficult to see how Marx's opting for a life of penury and dependence in order to produce his analyses of class and economy could be classified as privileged) to devote their lives to unceasing advocacy for social revolution — to the destruction of the bourgeoisie.

But this isn't a straightforward matter. Presumably Sidney and Beatrice Webb were thinking of the inadequacy of a simple distinction between capitalists and laborers when in 1917 they drafted what became Clause 4 of the constitution of the British Labour Party, setting out the party's aims and values, and which expressed the intention "[t]o secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry." So, workers selling their labor power might be individuals engaged in clerical or professional employment as well as manual workers. All that was needed for them to be proletarian was that their efforts should be exploited by the bourgeois class. The question presents itself whether some who work by brain might bridle at the suggestion that they are at one with the proletariat, but this is perhaps more of a concern for the Labour party than for us.

66 Engels, note to the 1888 edition. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 219.

In fact, of course, all who work participate in the system of capitalism, the system that structures our economic, political, and social existence. Thus, refuse collectors, office workers, and those who toil in Amazon warehouses are in this sense as bourgeois as small business owners, members of parliament, the employees of government and commerce, landowners, and the very rich, nearly all of whom belong to Marx's despised and useless rentier class which makes its money not from creaming off the profits of manufacturing but from investment and byzantine, spectral financial schemes.

§

Pinker may be reassured, then. We are all, except perhaps for the lumpenproletariat and a few tribal peoples in isolated parts of the world, bourgeois. We all live under the law of capital.

But not everyone is happy about that.

§

Let us consider these workers by brain who think of themselves as professionals, who work in education, scientific research, the governmental bureaucracies, including arts bodies, or in the NHS, and the civil service — those cadres of the educated who see themselves, with some justification, as laboring to the public good and occupying redoubts from which they seek to mitigate and perhaps push back against the insensate brutality of the economic-political imperium. These are the educated people, or elements of them, schooled in the idea of progress though reason and compassion, who work within the existing system to improve it, to ensure that humane values are brought to bear upon the problems, the tasks they are met with in their professional lives, who stand in a centuries-old tradition of enlightenment, the application of reason and empathy in the cause of furthering civilized being. These are not commitments to be sneered at. Such people defend and enact values which need to be nurtured. It is not far-fetched to identify such people with

Alasdair MacIntyre's "men and women of good will" who, faced with social and political chaos after the fall of the Roman Empire, worked to sustain the idea of moral and intellectual community. Today's educated people, however, operate within a settled system of barbarism. "This time the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time."[67]

§

A point MacIntyre does not confront is that today's educated, situated within the ruling system, must inevitably work to the continuance of the prevailing order (disorder?). Unlike MacIntyre's monks and scholars who established enclaves that, however threatened, contrived some functional isolation from the savage realpolitik and lawlessness of their times, their modern equivalents, however much they might lament the fact, occupy positions within which they are required to work on behalf of that order, to further its aims and purposes. Representatives of arts bodies must argue the case for the economic value of their "industry" and are obliged to seek sponsorship from commercial sources. Art is presented in terms of its popular appeal, its essentially commercial meaning. University academics know that they work within institutions whose primary concern is not to foster the intellectual and ethical qualities associated with the domain but to ensure their institutions' effective economic performance within a competitive market. University teachers are, more or less openly, encouraged to shape their courses to the demands of potential students, the consumers of education. Civil servants are required to apply their expertise and judgment to the design of social measures (which are always measures governed by economic priorities) that they know will produce injustice and suffering. School teachers, particularly perhaps within the humanities, find the parameters of their

67 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Duckworth, 1981), 263.

subjects constrained by governmental regulation, their teaching bound not to (what might be considered) the essential value of their discipline but to an overriding focus on acquiring the skills and techniques deemed vital to successful performance in public examination and thus (in an admittedly obscure way) to the economic performance of the country.

In terms of social positioning, occupationally, these workers by brain, these educated persons who typically work within state institutions, are bourgeois. They fulfill professional functions within a state whose purposes, programs, and enabling structures are informed by the calculative rationality of capitalist economics. As has been suggested the values and commitments of their educational and professional training must be sometimes, or frequently, at variance with the aims and actions prescribed by the state.

How, faced with governmental injunction, should these enlightened bourgeois, whose professional formation has taught them that knowledge passed through the sieve of critical thinking can lead to the enhancement of social and civic life, conduct themselves? A few resort to open denunciation of the system or thoroughgoing critique, but this kind of approach rarely leads to security of employment. For some the challenge is to exercise ingenuity in seeking out gaps, fissures, and aporia in the legally charged discursive edifice that confronts them, doing (what they consider to be) good by stealth, attempting not exactly to change the system from within but to limit its damage and plant some seeds of doubt. This strategy is admirable but liable to be exhausting and, since it is usually conducted in isolation, is unlikely to have more than a decidedly local impact on the monolithic structure it targets. Of course, most of those who take up position within these bourgeois institutions have no desire to openly or covertly seek to defeat the intentions of their employers. Some practice in an entirely uncritical way, putting their energies into and deriving their satisfactions from doing, within the given parameters, the tidiest and most effective work that they can. Others put their faith in the belief that they work within domains, within professions, that are essentially and in

themselves good, institutionally benign, and whatever the obstacles placed before them, whatever the tasks imposed upon them, their practice must always produce social and moral goods. As they see it their work is *essentially* progressive.

The fact is that educated people do little to oppose or openly acknowledge the systemic bind they find themselves in, apart from polite forms of protest such as writing letters to mildly liberal broadsheets or voicing their concerns in carefully measured terms on whatever platforms their professional structures make available. The essential fact that Debord, Raoul Vaneigem (to whom we return later), and others railed against is that we all, educated or not, inhabit a closed system which puts all thought and discourse to the work of obscuring the reality of our social existence. This is a system that "has no others." It permits no possibility of an alternative organization of human life. Everything may be said and disagreement is solicited "but under the condition of an agreement concerning the rules of disagreement. This is what is called consensus."[68] It turns out that Francis Fukuyama, ridiculed for announcing the triumph of liberal democracy and the end of history, was right, but not in the sense he intended. The global ascendancy, the perfection of liberal democratic rule, has been achieved, but not in the exalted guise, the moral grandeur, imagined by so many American progressives, but as its Real — pitiless, unrelenting global capitalism which refuses any other, abolishes any alternative.

Monks and scholars living during and after the collapse of the Roman Empire faced a world in which social order had disintegrated, a world of daunting uncertainty, but also a world that was not, unlike the present, bound by an iron "consensus." They were, despite the surrounding barbarism, relatively free to envisage new forms of morality and community, or so it has been claimed.[69] No such chaos and thus no such license is available to what might be thought of as their modern counterparts. It

68 Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 199.

69 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

is perhaps too much for them to opt, like Marx, for poverty in order to speak their truth, and we will look in vain for an Engels who might from their position of privilege and wealth sponsor radical critique and activism, given that today's philanthropic superrich prefer to donate parts of their absurd wealth toward mitigating some of the harsher side effects or negligences of the system, those good causes that might embellish with a light moral sheen careers dedicated to frenzies of predatory capital accumulation.

Today's educated professionals, the reluctant bourgeois, are constituted, their role built into the system, to offer improvements to the way the system works, to improve its efficiency, and to sustain the consensus by offering "balance," the system thereby managing an illusory moral concern and openness to dissent. They occupy a difficult position, which some of them recognize, but it is notable how casually, perhaps obliviously, so many collude with the system.

§

Bataille's comment that "Mankind as a whole resembles those parvenus who are ashamed of their humble origin"[70] indicates the source of the global domination of the bourgeoisie — the flight from animality to something higher, from the despised bloody mess toward an idea of refinement, using wealth and what it buys as the marker of distinction, a flight animated by disgust for those who lack refinement, which is to say wealth, stumbling into the psychotic grasp of capital, which promises, through unceasing ransacking of the natural world, escape from the horrors of flesh and matter into social position, gated communities, seasteading, cyborg release from the body, flight from the corruptions of Earth and indeed earth — dirt.

70 Bataille, *The Accursed Share,* Vols. II & III, 62.

Dismay, Cattle, Instinct

In Calvino's novel the eponymous Mr. Palomar observes a gorilla in a zoo, clinging to a car tire:

> [C]ontact with the tire seems to be something affective, possessive, and somehow symbolic. From it he can have a glimpse of what for man is the search for an escape from the dismay of living: investing oneself in things, recognizing oneself in signs, transforming the world into a collection of symbols; a first daybreak of culture in the long biological night. Perhaps identifying himself with it, the gorilla is about to reach, in the depths of silence, the springs from which language burst forth, to establish a flow of relationships between his thoughts and the unyielding, deaf evidence of the facts that determine his life.[71]

The dismay, of course, comes with that emergence from the long night.

§

The Nordic TV drama *All the Sins* includes an impressively comprehensive set of the genre's stock features: murder, sexual prohibition and transgression, drug abuse, familial breakdown and tyrannical familial relations, oppressive religiosity, possible incest, political fanaticism, political and business corruption, moments of unexpected violence, the subjugation of women, the apparently mindless slaughter of livestock, a community struggling to contain the consequences of its rigorous repressions, and, of course, two detectives struggling with their unhappy pasts. These themes are deployed more or less adroitly within the drama, but what is especially interesting about it is the opening sequence, repeated for each episode, in which, to the accompaniment of a mournful song in which a woman asks

71 Calvino, *Mr. Palomar*, 74–75.

her lover to take her with him to the war, we see close-ups of a few cattle grazing in some long grass in which household items, a cot, a children's toy, etc, have been placed. These objects do not seem to be in disrepair, do not appear to have been thrown away as of no use or importance and are entirely ignored by the cows who chew contentedly, incurious and unsurprised at their presence. We humans may wonder what — as viewers, as readers — we are intended to make of these objects, why they have apparently been placed with some care in the field, what intentions lie behind that placing, what anticipatory thoughts the film's makers want to arouse, what story, what meanings these objects might be part of. If we take note of these things — the song, the human-made and human-used things, the intense indifference of the cattle — they disturb us. Like Mr. Palomar, like his gorilla perhaps, we are condemned to search for meaning, for pattern and coherence where there is none.

The cattle know nothing of what the characters in the drama know. Their existence is ignorant of jealousy, greed, ever-present sexual longing, or anxiety. None have an idea of perversion. They know nothing of oppression, scheming, guilt, hatred, or shame. They know fear, hunger, and thirst, and unlike predatory creatures they lay no claim to a territory. They are impelled by a drive to ensure the survival of their genes, although to say that is to suggest some sort of conscious imperative, when we know that what moves them is an unthinking, blind impulse. The lion that kills the cubs born of a coupling between the lioness and another lion does not dream of founding a dynasty. Animals fear death but do not appear to know that they will eventually die. Some creatures lay plans for the future in relation to food — apes and corvids, for instance, but also rats and mice — and this implies an awareness of the past as much as a consideration of future needs, but no animal, it seems, plots the narrative of its future life or ponders the details of its earlier life. Violence is part of the animal world, but it is instinctual, never brooded upon, never persistent, never obsessive. Our closest animal relative, the chimpanzee, is capable of spectacular violence, but more interestingly, sometimes displays what looks

like cruelty and compassion, although both behaviors may be seen as instinctive social responses rather than transgression or observation of a (perhaps emergent) morality.

§

Cows, like horses, are capable of standing quietly in a field. Human beings, however, as has been famously observed, have difficulty sitting quietly in a room.

§

In the late 1960s, Debord, a man who lived throughout his life in as near as possible total noncompliance with the dominant culture of his (our) times, wrote as the first thesis in his book *Society of the Spectacle*: "The entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation."[72]

Indicating the Marxist lineage of his thought, he prefaces Chapter II with a quote from György Lukács: "The commodity can be understood in its undistorted essence only when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole […]. As labor is increasingly rationalized and mechanized, this subjugation is reinforced by the fact that people's activity becomes less and less active and more and more *contemplative*."[73]

§

Debord, in as far as he is remembered at all, is known as the man who thought up *happenings,* the staging of events meant to disrupt and thus reveal the constructed and hidden — because taken for granted — nature of social experience. The practice and

72 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Black & Red, 1970), 8.

73 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Martin Jenkins (Soul Bay Press, 2009), 35.

theory of happenings were essentially aesthetic — anticapitalist, hostile to established notions of art, what it was, who owned it and how it worked. But the happening was not invented by Debord. It was an American conception developed at the same time, possibly a little before the situationist ideas and practice that Debord and his collaborators worked at during the 1950s and '60s. Synchronicity.

§

Debord's ideas have been attacked from the right and can be seen as, in certain respects, surpassed by later thinking on the left. His claims might be summarized thus:

The spectacle is the dream theater of advanced capitalism, a "reality" that passes for experience, a dazzling display intended, with overwhelming success, to cast humanity as passive observers — spectators — of the circus conjured by the media, advertising, and a culture of acquisition — consumerism. On offer is the alluring cornucopia of pleasures for purchase: the panoply of possibilities available through the good offices of the established system of power, of democratic government under capitalism. In the society of the spectacle those who own the discourse are admired for their wealth and status — their success, their style — and the society's spectator populations respect and accept their preeminence. Thus, the spectacle presents itself as an incontestable, natural reality without alternative, and as such it secures the authority of a political and intellectual tyranny which aims to delete the possibility of alternative forms of being and is ruthlessly opposed to thinking which it cannot accommodate (although it is very good at incorporating and neutering ideas).

The state and the economy, Debord says, have become one. Historical consciousness has been destroyed, and we live in an eternal present. History "was knowledge that should endure and aid in understanding, at least in part, what was to come […].

[H]istory was the *measure* of genuine novelty."[74] "When the spectacle stops talking about something for three days, it is as if it did not exist."[75]

"Media professionals" comment on instances of the lies and excesses of the spectacle but recognize that they are part of the system and reliant on it for their livelihood, offering no more than "respectful rectifications or remonstrations."[76] The agencies of the spectacle edit experience. Disinformation, far from being the exclusive technique of fascists and populists, is sewn into the fabric of spectacular discourse, so that the commentariat knows just how far to go and where not to go with its opinions and judgments. The spectacle conditions every utterance of those who speak within it so that, whatever their good intentions, they must speak within and submit to that fundamental determination. The impartiality of the BBC, for example, implies and enacts a wary recognition of the powers upon whom its existence and activities depend. The balancing or "due impartiality" it attempts to maintain is effectively a balancing of the claims of democratic discourse and the desires of central beneficiaries of the spectacle. At every level, from reporters to interviewers to editors and specialist "correspondents," it trims evidence in awareness of the pressure — one might say, threat — exerted by established power. One does not have to be a Chomskyan to see this. "Liberal" media outlets, print and online, reliant on advertising income and conscious of the interests of their owners, produce their views and arguments under similar pressures. Reliable within its limits, the liberal media will only rarely offer a glimpse outside its own manufactured reality, and so give a sense of the calamity that underpins its restraint.

§

74 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (Verso, 1998), 15.

75 Ibid., 20.

76 Ibid., 16.

The case against Debord would include the following charges: From the left Debord's notions concerning governmental power have been invalidated by Foucault's more supple understanding that power is not in the possession of the state but is, in its operation, a network of competing or interacting forces, where the effectiveness of those forces is always varying, always in play. The state is never as powerful as we might think, or as Debord seems to suggest. Foucault has a concept of *the spectacle* as a technique of power exercised by premodern rulers to elicit the awe of their subjects or to inspire terror. Rulers would go on itineraries around their territories to display their magnificence, their wealth and military might. Enemies of the state would be subjected to a public, ritualized humiliation in which their agonies and abjection would be prolonged through the staged brutality of hanging, drawing, and quartering. This is the spectacle as terrifying and admonitory display of sovereign power. There is now no single locus of power. Government operates through techniques of surveillance and the shaping of useful and biddable subjectivities by way of diverse agencies, with the state as but one player among many.

Debord may be seen as subscribing to the possibility of a society of unsullied, undistorted communication, within which untruth, disinformation, deception would of course exist, but which would be easily identified and simply discounted as lies and attempts to lure a citizenry into attitudes and behaviors that would be counter to their best interests and to the functioning of democracy. Since David Hume, and no doubt earlier, but certainly since Freud, there has been a recognition that no such society has ever or could ever exist, since humanity is largely governed by what has been variously called its untutored inclinations, its passions, its unconscious desires. The project of bringing humanity to a state of being wherein it would conduct its affairs according to reason has manifestly failed and reason itself has been shown to have its own troubling unconscious.

Criticism from the right might accuse Debord of deploying the condescending and now superannuated term *false consciousness*, casting entire populations as dupes of a ruling-class

conspiracy intended to keep from them their true relation to power. This is an insult to the intelligence of ordinary people, framed by a leftist elite who believe they have a privileged access to the truth or, to put it otherwise, who claim that they know what's best for the insufficiently educated classes. Furthermore, he invents *the spectacle* in order to despise the genuine satisfactions that the mass of the population derive from the historically unparalleled opportunities for pleasure and instruction on offer in the culture of late *capitalism* (a word usually left unsaid by defenders of the status quo). He has no right to claim, *de haut en bas*, that the freely made cultural, social, and political choices of ordinary people are constrictions and perversions of (some vague notion of) authentic desire.

§

A full defense of Debord will not be attempted here — his books are, unlike much "theory," neither lengthy nor abstruse, and they may be directly read to assess the justice of these criticisms. We would merely note that his language is indeed at times indebted to a Marxist lexicon that preceded the studied and agonized subtleties of poststructuralism, but that there is ample evidence in his writing that his idea of the spectacle, even if it can be read as attributing too much potency to the state as its *réalisateur*, encompassed the effects of a multiplicity of agencies engaged in the play of power. Unlike, say, Foucault or Jacques Derrida, he does think that what he describes is organized according to a single principle — the mad, destructive logic of capitalism.

It is not clear that Debord believed that a pure and transparent communication could ever reign in human affairs. He certainly does not develop a critique of Enlightenment, but his writing is in itself an account of the failure of that project.

The allegation that non-establishment social critics are scornful of "ordinary" people and their cultural choices is regularly, monotonously regurgitated by the right. It is an accusation that is made by people pretending to be more simpleminded than they are, and it contains the idea that in a democracy all people

are free to choose as they wish among the entertainments and edification available, an accusation that appeals to the uncomplicated and obviously wrong contention that such choices are made without any shaping influences, any externally applied manipulative pressures. Debord would see this as plainly, willfully idiotic, given the enveloping, unceasing persuasive activity in which a modern citizenry is immersed, by way of the publicity machinery of the state, educational policy and practice, business and advertising, and what might be called the information industries, which nowadays include not just the press, film, TV, and radio but also the frenetic, unresting coercions and "influencing" of social media. It is tempting to borrow from the sage and astute critic Jim Royle: "Freely made choices, my arse."[77]

§

Debord was writing between the late 1960s and the late '80s, before the digital revolution and the advent of social media and the ways in which the internet has enabled manipulation and exploitation of populations by the market, how it has introduced unpredicted social division and disavowal of authority, and its inadvertent release of the ugly fantasies of a long-repressed social unconscious, but his thought might now be seen as a prescient analysis of society in the process of organizing its own breakdown.

He's worth reading also because his prose offers the pleasures of bone-dry irony and an uncompromising, disciplined swagger.

§

What is nakedly apparent is that the state has now little or no influence in shaping "its" populations — their identities, their commitments, their behaviors. It can appeal to atavistic attachments — prejudices, loyalties, mythologies — but (post)modern populations are instructed, educated, shaped, and guided by

77 *The Royle Family,* BBC sitcom series, 1998–2000 and 2006–2012.

forces beyond the control of the nation state. Everyone knows this and occasionally this fact is acknowledged by representatives of liberal humanism and democratic government, but it is recognized as a threat, a looming danger, whereas it is in fact closer to an achieved order of being. Foucault and even Debord were too cautious — the state is a marginalized player in a global power network ruled by an endlessly fertile, creative, and destructive power, by a lawless, uncontrolled capitalism.

Part II

Invitations to Err

Any critique of the educated by an educated person entails an element of hypocrisy by default.

§

Self-critique, for the educated person, may attempt some degree of levity, an occasional laugh, but turns mirth to seriousness in every descent to analysis. It is immediately freighted, by itself.

§

If one reason for becoming educated is to develop the habit of being right, a critique of the educated might begin by saying things that would strike the educated as self-evidently wrong.

§

Declarations against the educated cannot escape their own irony. They need not be consistent either. Statements of fact are

playfully deployed, as if to say: How do the educated look from this angle? And then from that?

§

The cultured, the intellectual, the literary type, the writer, the reader of proper news, and so on — these are not mere synonyms for *the educated,* they are symptoms of the problem of finding an object that is sufficiently defined, which has the necessary consistency to be declared a target.

§

The educated evade criticism at first. Press a little harder and then comes the obvious question: "By educated, do you mean civilized?" The question is itself a lure, a trap. To question the civilized is surely as broad, as impossible, as it is a clear sign of simple thinking.

§

"At a time when life itself is in decline, there has never been so much talk about civilization and culture," writes Antonin Artaud.[1]

§

Educated culture "in its entirety, is no longer sustained by a humanist ideology (or is increasingly reluctant to sustain it)," writes Roland Barthes.[2]

§

1 Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Victor Corti (Alma Classics, 2020), 3.

2 Roland Barthes, "To the Seminar," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Basil Blackwell, 1986), 341.

The educated person has become a survivalist of sorts, living from the scraps that remain of their habitat. The educated have no clear idea what they are, only vague notions about having received an education of the proper sort, a proprietary education, an education in property and possession. For the educated all experiences are privatized and the world exists as a resource to be appreciated by the educated person, which means, appropriated.

§

When the educated stand and mingle and converse they may exchange gestures, tokens of their acculturation. These tokens purchase only lightly on the listener and have little anchorage in the person who speaks, allowing conversations to be broken off and groups to re-form.

§

For the educated, being right is no longer a survival skill. Rightness is disconnected from matters of consequence — it is something to take pleasure in, preferably before others.

§

The educated are institutionalized. This can be seen most obviously when the educated turn to attack their own schools, the places that formed them, for being narrow and stifling.

§

The difference between the educated who are still being schooled, and those who have completed their schooling, can be observed in the design of their chairs — between those which are formed to keep the back straight and determined rather than lounging. School chairs are typically hard, whereas the institutions for seating educated people outside and beyond the school (the contemporary lecture theater, the concert hall, the more

luxurious type of dining room) will often introduce some comfort. It may be little more than the addition of padding to an otherwise insufferably school-like seat. This might be read as a reward for enduring the school, and for consenting to remain within its influence as adults gather to be further educated and further refined. But if, as Elias Canetti suggests, "Sitting always involves a downward pressure on something which is defenseless and incapable of exerting counter-pressure," and if, moreover, "[a]n upholstered chair is not only soft, but also obscurely gives the sitter the feeling that he is sitting on something *living*,"[3] the situation of educated sitting takes on a different aspect. The educated have acquired the knack, in effect, of squashing vitality from their environment — retaliation for the pain inflicted on their behinds at school.

§

Having an opinion on this or that is always better than having no opinion at all, since the educated are defined by a code, an outlook, which declares that the value of all things will be persistently judged, re-judged, and judged again.

§

Communication between so-called educated people and those who are deemed "uneducated" is understood, metaphorically, as a mode of *talking down* even by those who contest it. But there can be good deal of "talking up" too. In Thomas Bernhard's *Woodcutters*, the uneducated seem to tell one another directly what they think but only speak to the educated person in a "roundabout manner," perhaps imitating what they have witnessed.[4] Direct speech is associated with truthfulness, but its

3 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (Penguin, 1973), 452–53.

4 Thomas Bernhard, *Woodcutters*, trans. David McLintock (Faber and Faber, 2011), 71–72.

apparent rawness carries the potential for conflict. To adopt the idiom of the educated is to engage in games of linguistic deferral. Indirect speech makes virtues of prevarication, of not being too particular or pointed. In societies that managed to conceal their essential violence, these customs gained prominence.

§

The educated wager — If a given society is underpinned by violence but produces educated people and educated outlooks, surely that society cannot be fundamentally violent.

§

The educated excuse — If the world we inhabit is being destroyed, and even if educated people have some role in that, they are still needed to observe and measure and lament its destruction.

§

The educated wager [*version two: simplified*] — The existence of educated people is proof of the necessity of educated people.

§

The educated may like to listen to and read the news and feel they know what is going on. But for this they must develop strategies to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the persistent onslaught of *bad* news. Too much bad news is depressing, and their feeling depressed about the condition of the world must be assuaged.

§

To the extent that educated people consider state power reasonable — as most educated people may — they do so by softening its conception with their own logic and abject reasonableness.

An exemplary case — the very idea of proper conduct between warring states, as if the state itself was not a criminal enterprise founded within a criminal order. Every debate between educated people (even debate raising the prospect of the state as a malignant force that must be done away with) serves to uphold so-called state interests, state institutions, and state-sanctioned thinking, by dignifying them with the kind of serious attention, the *if and but* consideration they do not deserve. Educated thinking is a mechanism for placing existential problems on pause.

§

An educated person on Mars would consider the planet to be at last, necessary. Two educated people on Mars would decide that it is also at times, unreasonable.

Great Art, Great Theater

Artworks considered great or venerable offer some measure of security. This soothing effect may only be the reassurance that institutions have not yet so completely decayed as to finally neglect them.

For John Berger (drawing from the essay by Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction") the consolation of art derives from its "bogus religiosity."[5] This lingering attachment conditions the piety of experience for the bourgeois appreciator. It is bogus, because the visual arts have lost their religious or magical function or have been separated from what might have once been their "aura." The vital link between art and tradition has been subject to "a far-reaching liquidation," writes Benjamin, which is a direct consequence of modern reproductive techniques that endlessly reproduce an image and have it appear in all manner of contexts simultane-

5 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin, 2008), 21.

ously.[6] Berger's hope is that newly released artworks might be engaged with differently, and with less reverence, once they are subject to mass production and consumption. A piece of art, or its reproduction, can now appear in all manner of contexts — a bedroom, a toilet — and might be cut up, mixed, or meddled with. Berger may nonetheless be guilty of underestimating the grip of sham religiosity — it remains operative in art galleries and still assembles its shuffling crowds.

The originals were once exclusive and regarded in private, now they are on public display behind screens or guard ropes, coveted as objects with a price. Their price derives from their being the thing that has been reproduced, writes Berger. These originals may have been released from the palaces and houses of the ruling class for public consumption in permanent or temporary exhibitions, but they are loaned or given only on the condition of restrained viewing. Art galleries are reverential spaces, they are the temples of educated culture, and they are ruled by habits of consumption, of standing and looking, that remain extremely restricted if not impoverished, that function to limit how art might be engaged with in the context of its display. That so many visitors still submit to this regimen as they file past, testifies against what Berger imagined would come, a great transformation, an upheaval in how art functions in society that must ride on the annihilation of bourgeois mystification.

The art of an art gallery might have lost its "aura" in the sense it cannot serve to bring its appreciators to another plane of experience — this would be derided from the bourgeois outlook as cultish. But the art of an art gallery has not been disconnected from ritual. Its ritual is a ritual without "aura." It is a ritual performed without risking an experience that might be considered excessive, that might be perturbed by some sort of encounter with an unreachable beyond. This ritual is the modern, liberal performance of submission to rule, to Law, when not appearing

6 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (Pimlico, 1999), 216.

to submit, when seemingly lost in one's reverence before Art. It is the performance of submitting when revering, or when doing what one is supposed to do when revering — stand still, appear to concentrate, become lost in a contrived solemnity. It is a mode of submission which takes hold when thinking oneself free to appreciate something beyond the immediate. It is the performance of a restrained self-enclosure — the poise of those with "taste" — even before images that might question or depict everything the modern experience is not. The educated person is immune, will not be perturbed, by what has been hung so neatly.

Admittedly, some still travel to art galleries in search of an experience, in the hope that it might transport them to a state of wonder or sublimity. But any such experience will be immediately restricted by its context, including the sentiments of all the other spectators there assembled. Many will have come out of curiosity, wondering what all the fuss was about. And a small minority will be there out of technical interest, wishing to explore the technical aspects of painting. And still others who have always liked an artist or a work of art will have come in the belief that their pleasure will be deepened by seeing the real thing.

To the extent that experts are still conjured in such places to interpret by way of audio or video guides, or at least write a small notice noting the basic particulars of an artwork, they reinforce the stale atmosphere of the museum. And here Berger may be forgiven his misplaced optimism for the bluntness of his critique: Art specialists, whose role is to interpret and explain the significance, the continued importance of the artwork, are merely "the clerks of the nostalgia of a ruling class in decline."[7]

§

"None of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory when art knew no need to justify itself, when one did not ask

7 Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 32.

of a work of art what it said because one knew (or thought one knew) what it *did*," writes Susan Sontag.[8] This is an ancient problem, Sontag claims, insofar as art has long been viewed as a reflection of, or a commentary upon reality or experience. From the perspective of (our) dominant "post-mythic consciousness," art cannot be something purely "incantatory" or "magical," a thing that gestures beyond what can be otherwise described.[9] Jean-François Lyotard mounts a similar analysis: "Art no longer plays the role it used to, for it once had a religious function, it created good forms, some sort of myth, of a ritual, of a rhythm, a medium other than language through which the members of a society could communicate by participating in a same music, in a common substratum of meaning."[10] Now there is none of this. It has become impossible. Why? asks Lyotard. "Because we are in a system that doesn't give a crap about sacredness."[11] The function of the artist is "no longer to produce good forms, new *good* forms" but to "*deconstruct* them systematically and to accelerate their obsolescence."[12] This is in part driven by a capitalist system that will persistently and unfailingly incorporate the "avant-garde." This is how artists are also "pushed forward [just as they push themselves], they are literally chased out of the very deconstructed forms they produce, they are compelled to keep on finding something else. I believe their research knows no other drive," writes Lyotard.[13] A certain degree of hostility to Art seems necessary, then, to the further production of artistic experience. It might lead to new forms of plastic (and thereby productive) ignorance.

§

8 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Penguin, 2009), 3–4.
9 Ibid., 3, 6.
10 Jean-François Lyotard, *Driftworks*, trans. Susan Hanson et al. (Semiotext(e), 1984), 27.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 26.
13 Ibid., 32.

The Western experience of art is brought into question by the work of bourgeois "generosity." This situation is the educated belief that art galleries are not merely worth visiting for their enriching effects, but that they *should* be visited, and it is an indicator of cultural progress if the demographic broadens. As fresh visitors from a broadening demographic submit to the usual conformity, it becomes clear to those present that art does nothing at all — beyond inflicting its particular regimen on the viewer — which reasserts the question *but what does it mean?* or *but what is it trying to say?,* all variations on the more basic question, *but what is the point of any of this?*, a question that must remain unanswered and in that unanswered form produces the very response that so-called unsophisticated visitors are criticized for; their frustration at the lack of an answer, at the artworld withholding its thinking, or presenting that thinking in a form that is characteristically and systematically evasive. The artworld is indicted for its "airy fairy" nonsense, its pretentiousness, its aloofness, a challenge it bats away with apparent ease as yet another symptom of ignorance. It defines itself against that ignorance — the undereducated are always received by the educated as lacking, as in need of the latter's offerings even if they are overwhelmingly staid. And yet, it is not inconceivable that the ignorant will come to some understanding of their function, and discover how their ignorance is produced, is systematized, and may have its role in the elevation of Art.

§

Great theater, opera, concerts, and musicals of the higher sort — these might be viewed as the feasting halls of educated good feeling. But the collective experience they promise is something of a lie. In actuality, such places divide their audiences into those who take satisfaction in "getting it" and those who do not, those who paid for the best seats and those who put up with the worst, those who like to buy a program and those who do not, those who block the view ahead and those who lament them for the entire performance. There is no great upsurge of collec-

tive feeling, only its simulated effect — the restrained action of applauding. Applause nonetheless amplifies the sentiment, the feeling of some notion of a shared humanity — or what they call humanity — including *the very idea that humanity is shared*, and the accompanying wish that the idea never be tested. This is why the seats are screwed down and designed to flap up when not in use, minimizing the space available when occupied. In some theaters the knees almost make connection to the shoulders in front, this *almost* being crucial, since the space between sitters is reduced as if all were one mass of beholders. Actual physical contact is still precluded to avoid too much stimulus.

The cinema, which largely caters for so-called lower forms of culture, has more easily relaxed into providing chairs that resemble couches, affording more freedoms to the body and greater indulgences for the sitter. There is a mirroring of the lounge room operating here which does not occur with the theater. In the latter case, high culture is enjoyed with the audience reduced to moving between its two postures, standing at times, mainly sitting upright. The theater audience is still capable of passionate experience, but this generally occurs away from or in spite of cultural enrichments, often in isolation, mainly by accident, or occasioned by strained relations. Extreme emotions (and the very idea of the extreme) are localized and ruled out. As Canetti suggests, high culture has ill-equipped its people to cope with strong experiences and conspires in their diminishment,[14] or at least relegates intensities to the domestic sphere, the passions of family dysfunction.

§

Against the persistent falsehood which links higher acculturation to greater humanity, Canetti presents a brutal contrast: "What the play [or concert] could not achieve is immediately

14 Theaters and concerts, Canetti writes, "serve, on the whole, to soften and diminish the passions at whose mercy people feel when alone." Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 54.

achieved by a fire."[15] When the fire alarm is sounded the crowd assembles and something is at last felt. The crowd will move together and feel together, and grow and morph and share an experience that cuts beneath its refinements. Only, the chairs get in the way, the rows and the aisles — all the implements of their distinguished imprisonment — distort the crowd, turn it inward, and cause it to break apart into a group of people climbing over other people. The architecture of the hall is shown at last to be brutalizing — to be an impediment to community (against which the solution isn't no architecture at all, of course). Hence the significance of books, and of the novel in particular, to a class that cannot properly commune. Books hold importance to a group that is imprisoned by its possessive, and, in the last analysis, its eminently destructive individualism.

The Novel, the Book

The literary novel is the choice book into which the educated person escapes, only to encounter themselves again, in the most literal sense, as a holder of books.

§

For Barthes the bourgeois novel is merely a type of "printed speech"[16] — with speech here figured as a limited and coercive medium. Presumably this refers to the conventional and commercially successful novel in particular, which is enslaved to the idea of connectedness, which is delivered in the form of a fully articulated narrative, with each sentence bound to what immediately follows or precedes, and which desires above all else to be understood — meaning, easily followed along lines that are predicable, that are familiar, secure, and comforting.

15 Ibid., 28.

16 Roland Barthes, "Writing the Event," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Basil Blackwell, 1986), 154.

§

Viable novels — those picked up and published by the major presses — are surrounded by some of the most painfully tired and yet persistent clichés: *I could not put it down; it was a real page turner.* One such literary success, Orhan Pamuk's *The New Life*, is built upon the worst and most deceitful cliché of them all, "I read a book one day and my whole life was changed,"[17] which also happens to be its opening sentence. What makes this novel interesting, nonetheless, is that it takes the cliché literally and organizes its world around it. The book within the novel does indeed entirely change the life of the protagonist (or so that protagonist thinks). Everything is perceived differently following the "light" it emits once opened (and this radiance seems more than a mere metaphor): "my room was no longer the same old room, nor the streets the same streets, my friends the same friends, my mother the same mother."[18] Placing the intentions of Pamuk's own book to one side, this idea that a book could change everything (and that a novel based on that idea could be so alluring to so many readers) indicates the transcendental significance still attached to the object. It inherits something of the mystique and the unfulfillable promise of religions of the book.

§

Books are, undoubtedly, fetish objects, and book possession the means by which the educated person externalizes their intellect. It allows that intellect to make a fetish of itself.

§

The educated need national and international prizes, book awards, accolades, and other markers of distinction, to orientate their reading. This is due to oversaturation, undoubtedly. It is a

17 Orham Pamuk, *The New Life*, trans. Güneli Gün (Faber & Faber, 2015), 3.
18 Ibid., 7.

sign, too, of the spiritual function assumed by the book in a culture no longer oriented by religion yet retaining the wish to be organized by a higher power. This spiritual function is one the book nonetheless fails at — its religious assignment is too vague, too dispersed — and the books themselves are not adequate.

§

In mainstream literature the author fulfills, in part, the function of a priest in search of the book, and the book prize serves as a kind of retrospective ordination.

§

Unacceptable books are made acceptable by explication. A once scandalous text is also rendered anodyne by its liberal-minded readers who show, by the force of their example, that is to say, by the fact they remain unruffled, how little the book has taken effect, how much it has failed to perturb them. Some books are adjusted to merely as a function of their growing age. This is a consequence of the modern and misguided idea whereupon the older something (or someone) becomes the less dangerous it is presumed to be.[19]

§

Books can stretch human consciousness but for this to happen they must first stretch patience and trouble the act of reading. Schools kill this potential to the extent they equate fluency with advancement and education with the increase of certainty.

§

19 The reprinting of Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir* as a Deluxe Edition would be a good example. Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Penguin, 2006).

The love of books has its limits of acceptability, especially for the young, a limit worth aspiring to. As Thomas Bernhard writes in *Extinction*, "You go to the library to pursue your *perverse thoughts,* my mother would insist […]. She constantly suspected me of pursuing *perverse thoughts* […], she would say that I was always pursuing my *perverse thoughts*."[20]

§

"Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes' chewing," is how Flann O'Brien begins one of his books.[21]

§

"Mr Hackett turned the corner and saw, in the failing light, at some little distance, his seat," is how Samuel Beckett begins one of his.[22]

§

"Oh. He shat himself," is how Daša Drndić begins one of hers.[23]

§

Literary culture is incontinent. It continues to pour out words, books, and reviews, and pour over those books it has already produced. As publishers and agents like to remind their authors, value will be extracted. Writers must produce noise — noise about themselves, and noise about others. That noise drives interest, interest directs profit. There is a trove of books to be admired (and acquired) which includes those books literary culture once neglected, books that brought their authors little

20 Thomas Bernhard, *Extinction: A Novel*, trans. David McLintock (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 129. Emphases original.
21 Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Penguin, 2001).
22 Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (Faber and Faber, 2009).
23 Daša Drndić, *Doppelgänger*, trans. S.D. Curtis (Istros Books, 2018).

material comfort when they lived, but came to feed their estates, discoverers, and publishers, once they died. When publishers announce a new "acquisition" — their next title — the author celebrates, hoping to still be alive when the profits turn in. The author wishes to be an object, an asset in another's catalog. The death of the author is here differently and more bluntly enacted. That death is not simply achieved through a dispersal (which kills the fiction of the Creator-author or the author-God). It is achieved by the author's entombment in material culture. This draw, this desire to be objectified, might itself be a residual effect of the desire to be a God of sorts which haunts the modern outlook. The desire to be a God has been transported in the literary context into the desire to be a household name.

§

The sign of educated indigence — book vending at the airport departure lounge, the most obvious case of educated people buying books to pass time with. Or as a connoisseur might say, the most obvious case of undereducated people in transit.

§

The nonintellectual life — "The lowest of genres — life itself," declares Nathan Zuckerman in one of Philip Roth's books.[24]

§

The intellectual life — "In Rome I started to make notes again, something I'd been unable to do for years, and to formulate ideas about everything: not just about my approaching dissolution but about everything imaginable […]. I went to a theater […]. And to the opera, which for years I'd shunned like the plague. And I started reading again […], books, real books," writes Bernhard

24 Philip Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson* (Jonathan Cape, 1984), 103.

in *Extinction*.[25] This was an author who allowed judgmentalism to run amok within his fictions, who made an art of conceit, who made conceits conceive their own destruction.

§

Second-hand bookshops and their owners—"the thing that chiefly struck me," George Orwell wrote, "was the rarity of really bookish people […]. I doubt whether ten per cent of our customers knew a good book from a bad one."[26] Here, in their ignorance, Orwell's customers function as so many incitations to his class prejudice, his misogyny, and so too his racism. They ranged from those who would never read the books they purchased ("first edition snobs" who hardly seemed interested in reading, or those who buy a Dickens, for instance, because they feel they ought), to readers devoid of all judgment and taste who consumed a "frightful torrent of trash" on subscription. To these purchasers can be added a motley group including "oriental students haggling over cheap textbooks," "vague-minded women looking for birthday presents for their nephews," and "moth-eaten and aimless people," that is to say vast numbers of "not quite certifiable lunatics" drawn in by the opportunity to browse without spending.[27] Even when the stock includes a few "good titles," a bookshop is destroyed by its customers, it seems. The love of books, to hold them, to possess them, is killed for the person who works there, a person such as Orwell, who fell out of love with books (so he claims) after having told so many lies about them to his customers.

§

25 Bernhard, *Extinction*, 101–2.
26 George Orwell, "Bookshop Memories," in *Essays* (Penguin, 2000), 25.
27 Ibid., 25–27.

Book collectors and their so-called libraries — "I am unpacking my library. Yes, I am," is how Benjamin begins his essay.[28] Serious book collecting is only possible if the bulk of a collector's prized books are not read. Collectors do not read what they gather but derive other satisfactions from their books. They also tend to avoid bookshops, preferring dealers or auctions where each book is encountered in isolation. Each book acquires its value as it is held in seclusion and marveled at, long separated from its companions in press, from books that were once shelved alongside but have been dispersed and lost. The value of the antiquarian book is established in its fullest, most personal sense, as it joins the collection of its owner. This book derives its significance from the collector who enhances its uniqueness by selecting and then living with it. Benjamin knows that the "time is running out for the type that I am discussing here." He is aware that "public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections."[29] And yet he declares nonetheless that "ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects."[30] Benjamin's attachment to book collecting might be dismissed as a personal indulgence, perhaps related in some way to the activity of Orwell's "first edition snobs," and yet, it appeals to a need for some kind of protection, or respite, that every bookish person may on some level relate to. At the point of unpacking, book ownership answers the need for comfort before erudition.

§

In Bernhard's *Extinction,* Franz-Josef imagines a book that can perturb its surroundings, a book that will finally annihilate its object: "The only thing I have fixed in my head is the title, *Extinction*, for the sole purpose of my account will be to extinguish

28 Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (Pimlico, 1999), 61.
29 Ibid., 68.
30 Ibid., 69.

what it describes, to extinguish everything that Wolfsegg means to me, everything that Wolfsegg is, everything, you understand, Gambetti, really and truly everything."[31]

Wolfsegg is, of course, a fiction, and Franz-Josef and Gambetti characters, figurations, in the novel. This vast estate only exists because of the book. It is curious that Franz-Josef can only imagine writing a book to extinguish all trace of Wolfsegg once *Extinction,* or something like it, has been written. He must imagine it from within its pages. This is an absurd, laughably vertiginous predicament.

To the extent that the educated imagine their end — figured as the shrinkage and diminishment of liberal values, or more globally, as ecocide, for instance — they must resort to similar means, that is to say, by way of further cultural projections written into what they read or think or see.

Impossible Debasements, Educated Hands

"It is we who have covered the lands with a pall of smoke and are walking to our own funerals under it," writes Edward Carpenter.[32] This "we" is intended in its broadest sense. It is meant to encompass "the civilized" — all civilized people of our era — including, by the very fact of its legibility, every appreciator of this quote.

§

"I remember," Max Brod writes, "a conversation with Kafka which began with present-day Europe and the decline of the human race. 'We are nihilistic thoughts, suicidal thoughts that come into God's head,' Kafka said. This reminded me at first of the Gnostic view of life: God as the evil demiurge, the world as

31 Bernhard, *Extinction*, 99.

32 Edward Carpenter, *Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure* (Erratum Press, 2022), 37.

his Fall. 'Oh no,' said Kafka, 'our world is only a bad mood of God, a bad day of his.' 'Then there is hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know.' He smiled. 'Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope — but not for us.'"[33] Kafka's "not for us" raises the question once more of whom this "us" includes and presents again the suggestion that this "us" simply includes every appreciator of the sentiment.

§

"The male's inability to relate to anybody or anything makes his life pointless and meaningless (the ultimate male insight is that life is absurd), so he invented philosophy and religion," writes Valerie Solanas.[34]

The biological inadequacy of men drives everything else they touch, from war to so-called great art to religion. There is no option but to seek their elimination. And why not start with an artist. Everything men do is an attempt to cover for their deficiency, an effort to backfill their incompleteness. Philosophers recognize this absence, she claims, but cannot face the fact that only men suffer from it. Consequently, "they label the male condition the Human Condition" and "posit their nothingness problem, which horrifies them, as a philosophical dilemma," one that produces a so-called crisis in the essence of being.[35]

It is worth noting that the elimination of men can only be imagined from within the context of an educated outlook that recognizes and considers itself able to diagnose the sins of men. For that reason Solanas cannot take a position fully outside of what she deplores, even if she is well placed to make the existing settlement tremble a bit. But this is not the same as saying: "surely Solanas cannot mean what she says."[36] The radicalism of

33 Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (Pimlico, 1999), 112–13.

34 Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (Verso, 2004), 52.

35 Ibid., 53.

36 One reading is to suggest that the *SCUM Manifesto* be viewed as a parody or a satire of Freud, but this amounts to a dismissal of her more radical

the *SCUM Manifesto* may be found in its entrapment, its enmirement in the order of things it disputes, its elision of claims to revolutionary purity. Solanas does not presume to escape: "Dropping out is not the answer; fucking-up is."[37] Here she remains exemplary.

§

An educated revolutionary, if there is such a thing, must work to relinquish all attachments to their culture, to undermine everything they know. Few have put it as plainly as Sergey Nechayev.

"The revolutionary is a doomed man," writes Nechayev in 1869. He "knows that in the very depths of his being, not only in words but also in deeds, he has broken all the bonds which tie him to the social order and the civilized world with all its laws, moralities, and customs, and with all its generally accepted conventions. He is their implacable enemy, and if he continues to live with them, it is only in order to destroy them more speedily."[38]

Nechayev's *Revolutionary Catechism* might nonetheless be viewed as a document not as broken as it recommends — its function is to organize revolutionary consciousness after all.

§

Elias Canetti claimed that tree-climbing primates, including our ancestors, can be distinguished by the manner of their grasping. These hands follow a precise sequence: as one grasps for a branch, the other holds tight until the new purchase is secured and only then releases so that the grasping hand now becomes the new hand for securing purchase and the old purchasing hand becomes the new grasping hand. This grasping and releas-

claims. It is another way of arguing that the argument is not in earnest.

37 Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 75.

38 Sergey Nechayev, "The Revolutionary Catechism" (1869), https://www.marxists.org/subject/anarchism/nechayev/catechism.htm.

ing must be precisely coordinated for the primate to climb and progress high above ground. This movement of hands is also, much later, the origin of trade, Canetti speculates. "The profound and universal pleasure men take in trading is thus partly explained by the fact that trade is a translation into non-physical terms of one of the oldest movement patterns. In nothing else today is man so near the apes."[39] One hand holds an item to be exchanged and the other grasps outward, only releasing the item once the grasping hand has secured the thing it will be exchanged for. This coordination of limbs is a basic but fundamental motion which gives the hand, with its opposing thumb, its central significance in primate and human psychology. Grasp and release, grasp and release. The hand is afterward the origin of representation too and the origin of value, where the first abstract signs are made by the hand in the act of shaping the world with human digits. Hands enact the transformation of their world, and the first signs, their first language, must be viewed in similar terms as a transformation, an imposition that destroys and remakes and manipulates its environment. As Canetti writes: "The specific life of the hands, in this its earliest sense, still retains its pristine force in gesticulation."[40]

Canetti's scheme might be extended wherein the educated are now distinguished too by the manner in which they operate their hands: First, in making an argument, second, in holding a book.

When presenting an argument, the most witless and symptomatic of educated gestures is to state: on the one hand this and on the other hand that. Here the educated person holds the scales of judgment, a weighing pan suspended from each arm. The educated have forgotten that arguments cannot be made without grasping and ungrasping, without realizing possibilities by relinquishing others.

Holding a book takes patience, it also involves the hands in an awkward gesture. Canetti suggests that the hand of the pri-

39 Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 248.
40 Ibid., 254.

mate learns patience when picking for fleas and ticks and other parasites. The educated hand learns patience again, but differently, and this time asocially. The educated are distinguished by how they hold the book which is the basic and enduring symbol of educated pre-eminence. This hand no longer exchanges, it no longer operates in the basic movement of grasping and ungrasping (and here the culture of the educated considers itself above the rude mechanics of trade), nor does it pick over the skin of another (at least not literally, the educated prefer to pick one another over from a distance). Rather, each hand is held outward, and half closed, the digits straight or a little curved, propping each half of the opened book. The ensemble orients itself toward the goal of an essential stillness which it will, nonetheless, fail to reach. Perhaps here the educated most acutely feel their superiority, in gesture, over the lower primates and the brutes. Their hands have finally been allowed to atrophy and petrify before the work of the educated mind. These hands have softened against which the calloused hand is the foremost sign of the uneducated — as in Canetti's *Auto da Fé.* These are the "coarse, calloused fingers" of the housekeeper, Therese, who wears gloves when reading or pretending to read Peter Kien's coveted books.[41]

§

"We are all trying to explain something to the others with gestures, grimaces, all of us like monkeys. Thank God, there are these cards […] a deck of tarots," writes Italo Calvino.[42]

A return to muteness — the great, unprobed silence before the first grunts that were to be words — is the topic of Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies.* The hand — Canetti's originator of symbolism — is returned to its central place, as stories are told, or understood, through the turning of tarot cards, as well as gestures and facial expressions. Extraordinary narrative detail

41 Elias Canetti, *Auto da Fé*, trans. C.V. Wedgwood (Harvill Press, 2005), 29.
42 Italo Calvino, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, trans. William Weaver (Vintage, 1977), 52.

is managed and, even though the audience has no real means of sharing its understanding, there is somehow a sense of agreement in how the cards are to be read.[43] This text is, among other things, an ironic comment upon the ridiculous self-assurance with which a narrative proceeds (in fiction, but also nonfiction[44]), trimming back its possibilities without comment, failing to reflect on how greatly it has reduced the universe in order to advance, all of it on the fair wager that most readers will be habituated to follow as if they already led. This indicates just how much must be obliterated from consciousness, from possibility, for the educated to exist as they do within comprehensible narrative structures. The opposite is felt, of course, where the great literatures, histories, artworks, and archaeological deposits of all prior efforts to sustain and enrich civilized living are valued for the extraordinary breadth of experience they record. It will be objected that Calvino's fiction actually demonstrates the creative scope of a culture when so many stories can be told from the same select tarot cards read in different directions. But this is the objection of a mathematician who points out the number of different sequences that may be made from the same group of symbols organized and reorganized according to the same rules. "What is left of me is only the manic determination to complete, to conclude, to make the sums work out," writes Calvino.[45] The effects may be vertiginous, but the system is itself still entirely rule-bound and domesticated.

§

In his last novel, *Funeral Rites,* Jean Genet appears to concede that all attempts to occupy a world which is "the underside of

43 In the first story the narrator declares, in response to one particular reading, "the solution quickly asserted itself, I believe to us all" (ibid., 10). Given that all are mute, and interpretations are not confirmed with a subsequent layer of tarot cards or any other means, this is an extraordinary feat of collective reading.

44 Canetti's *Crowds and Power* would be a good example of the latter.

45 Calvino, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, 46.

yours," will not lead to singularity, to a state of being which has finally exceeded the moral imperium of bourgeois society by burrowing beneath it. Singularity, a final solitude, an escape from fixed categories, will not ensue, for these places, the undersides, are overpopulated too. Their shores are "more populous than Death," and their occupants come easily. They make a home for themselves in the confines of their infamy. Genet suggests that the only place where he has managed to find solitude, indeed, is in the very place to which the bourgeois at times withdraws: "all I can do to attain solitude is turn back and adorn myself with the virtues of your books," Genet writes, addressing this 'your' again to his bourgeois reader.[46] The bourgeois book, the novel presumably, has the capacity to afford Genet a kind of sublimation, an escape that dropping out of society and associating with society's dregs and rejects could not supply.

Snobbery and Literature

If literature (or the love of literature) deserves contempt, that contempt should be targeted not at its so-called lower forms, the trash, but at the persistence of the novel in its secure form, as a celebrated read that may be enjoyed and talked about without too much discomfort.

§

"It may be argued that there is not much sin in continually exploiting this or that thoroughly worn subject or style if it still pleases and amuses," writes Vladimir Nabokov in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.[47] But for Knight, "the merest trifle, as, say, the adopted method of a detective story, became a bloated and malodorous corpse. He did not mind in the least 'penny dread-

46 Jean Genet, *Funeral Rites*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Panther Books, 1973), 158.

47 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Penguin, 2017), 79.

fuls' because he wasn't concerned with ordinary mortals; what annoyed him invariably was the second-rate, not the third- or *n*th-rate, because here, at the readable stage, the shamming began, and this was, in an *artistic* sense, immoral."[48]

Snobbery against the second rate, but not the third, or fourth rate, might be put to work. Nabokov describes Knight's hunting down of exhausted forms, a hunt which proceeds "with something akin to fanatical hate," as he seeks out those things "which had once been fresh and bright but which were now worn to a thread, dead things among living ones; dead things shamming life, painted and repainted, continuing to be accepted by lazy minds serenely unaware of the fraud."[49] Most of what counts (is celebrated) as literature today is guilty of recycling spent forms.

§

Wolfsegg, the country estate in Bernhard's *Extinction,* contains five libraries, no less, giving its occupants — who do not read, who do not appreciate — more to be "ashamed of intellectually than those who only had one."[50] The collection is vast and "as valuable as the world-famous monastery library at Lambach,"[51] but the original and founding collector is dead and the libraries are closed. The sixth was lost in a fire. Something else to be shameful of, then. The loss of the sixth library functions as yet another marker of the lack of care or appreciation for culture of Wolfsegg's incumbents. One might wonder if the burning of books invites especial lament (in Bernhard's *Extinction* and beyond), and whether or not in the process of that lament the Book is imagined in its most disturbingly abstract form. The symbolic resonance of a book burning extends far beyond the lost object even if the book that is burned is the last object, the last remaining edition of its kind. A book metaphysics asserts

48 Ibid., 79–80. Emphasis original.
49 Ibid., 79.
50 Bernhard, *Extinction*, 28.
51 Ibid., 11.

itself in the (imagined) disappearance of the physical book. The book which becomes vapor carries through to formlessness, to oblivion, all of the artifices, all the devices, which sought to secure it in place, to secure its place, and to secure the cultured by way of it. And this is an unspeakable crime.

§

The library featured toward the end of Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* functions as a life sentence in a cruel and hopeless imprisonment.[52] Tony Last, a country gent, winds up trapped in the Amazon rainforest, condemned to read the complete Dickens to his illiterate captor, Mr. Todd (a man who is also his savior, having found Last lost and delirious in the jungle). Mr Todd's previous prisoner did the job well enough, if not quite so pleasingly, being literate but Black; Tony is the better choice. There is a reassuring whiteness to his speech which belies the hollowness at the core of his civilized bearing, its determined blindness to its own violences. He can enunciate the words in a manner that brings satisfaction, carrying the diction of his class to his captor. But Tony also carries the death of that class, and he carries it in its literary preferences and its modes of expression. The death of Tony and the culture he carries will not be achieved by the annihilating effects of nature — mosquitoes, ticks, and biting flies — but by its own processes of cultural atrophy.

So long as Last retains this ability to read, he is a prisoner to it. Finishing Dickens will not mean an end to the toil. He knows that upon completing the entire Dickens he must start over from the beginning. Meanwhile, hearing Dickens has not taught his captor the wrongness of his cruelty. The complete Dickens carries no moral force on its own. Books are not ennobling of themselves, or at least, the cultural goods they contain are ineffectual in the face of power. The words merely soothe and satisfy Todd's repose once they begin to sound reassuringly Dickensian. Hence Last is destroyed not in spite of himself but through

52 Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust* (Penguin, 1951).

himself. He is maintained in his miserable existence and held in captivity because of an impulsive, near-automated devotion to what he represents. His culture is fed back upon itself through the relentless, punitive process of proper enunciation. This culture is reduced to its repeatable gestures and sounds, to sentences that are set down and told back, cycled, and transformed into an annihilating drawl.

Books are often supposed to offer a means of escape to other worlds, or tools for improving or bearing the world as it is. And yet books are also the world's prisons, or can function that way, particularly those that have come to represent the sentimental attachments of a culture at ease with itself. Notoriously Dickens, for all his social critique, has become another author to cosy up with.

§

"One of the reasons for the stifling atmosphere we live in […] is our respect for what is written," writes Artaud.[53] Respected texts, and artworks, so-called *masterpieces*, are the supports of middle-class conformity and will not stir thought into traveling outside itself. The message of past masterpieces is "clothed in a language which has lost any contact with today's crude, epileptic rhythm."[54]

Artaud looked about him and judged his surroundings much as Nietzsche did, decades earlier. This is a period that is essentially neurotic, that is not up to the task of escaping its moribund condition, or even of perceiving it, and retreats to its cultural promises and refinements for security. The idea that art should charm, or console, or ennoble, that it should deepen the interiority of the reader, these are decadent notions. Lazy, ineffective as they may be, these fancies might still be tolerated, Artaud admits, "as long as life outside held good." But from the perspective of the 1930s it seemed sufficiently obvious, eminently clear

53 Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, 53.
54 Ibid.

that "everything which used to sustain our lives no longer does so and we are all mad, desperate and sick."[55]

§

"How could we bear the weight and sheer depth of works and masterpieces, if to their texture certain impertinent and delicious minds had not added the fringes of subtle scorn and ready ironies?" writes Emil Cioran, somewhat contradicting, or at least nuancing, what one might take from Artaud.[56]

§

In Bernhard's *Old Masters,* works of art that have the designation "masterpiece" are again considered abhorrent. As the protagonist declares, "In order to be able to bear them I search for a so-called *massive mistake* […], turning that so-called perfect work of art into a fragment […]. Our greatest pleasure, surely, is in fragments […]. Our age has long been intolerable as a whole he said […], only when we perceive a fragment of it is it tolerable to us."[57]

§

"The poverty of *expression,* which is the mind's poverty, is manifest in the indigence of words, in their exhaustion and their degradation: the attributes by which we determine things and sensations finally lie before us like so much verbal carrion," writes Cioran.[58]

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55 Ibid., 55.

56 E.M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard (Arcade Publishing, 2012), 8.

57 Thomas Bernhard, *Old Masters: A Comedy*, trans. Ewald Osers (Penguin, 2010), 29–30. Emphasis original.

58 Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, 10.

Hands (Again) and Martyrdom

Georges Bataille distinguishes between the hand that dies — as all hands must die — and the hand that writes and finds itself within the limits of language. These are the "limits accepted by the hand that writes but refused by the hand that dies."[59] Two hands, then, in one. The hand that dies and falls to matter and becomes radically dispersed will travel beyond anything even remotely conceivable by the hand that writes. The hand that dies vastly exceeds the hand that writes in this respect whatever the latter hand may achieve in its own domain, in the realm of literature. The hand that is trapped by language cannot properly relate the horrific excess that surrounds its being, the excess that is mute, terrible beyond words, an excess that is nonetheless attractive, which holds even the hand that is trapped by writing to the fascination of its horror.

The hand that writes can still open out within its language and its descriptions "upon a certain vista of anguish, upon a certain lacerating consciousness of distress."[60] But to do so the hand, or the consciousness that moves it, must have had some knowledge of excess, of the realm of terror. Bataille claims that the mind could not bend language to describe or attempt a description of the realm beyond its borders if it did not have this knowledge of "the extremest pleasure" and if it "knew nothing of extremest pain."[61] Or, as he puts it in *Eroticism*, "Only violence can bring everything into a state of flux," and deliver, one presumes, the kind of experience of excess that becomes the basis of what he designates as transgressive literature.[62] As the condition of such literature, this might seem too much, for most, and might be viewed as an occasion for bravado on the part of those who make such claims for their own literary outputs, first among them Bataille.

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59 Georges Bataille, "Preface to Madame Edwarda," in *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Penguin, 2012), 130.

60 Ibid., 124–25.

61 Ibid., 125.

62 Bataille, *Eroticism*, 17.

There is obviously a role for the reader here too. Bataille suggests elsewhere that such literature needs to be read "in a trance."[63] This idea is accompanied by a new but lower burden now placed on the author. Bataille proposes, a little differently, that this literature of excess, of transgression, must appeal to "a moment of fury," or "an intolerable, impossible ordeal." Many contemporary experiences might fall under this category. Lives are full of events that might become engines of a literature of excess. These experiences, dwelled upon, rendered productive, might promise a proliferation of literature, the only kind of literature Bataille considers worth bothering with when he asks: "How can we linger over books to which their authors have manifestly not been *driven?*"[64] Nietzsche says something similar. And so might Cioran if he did not find the activity so deplorable. But Cioran also doubles back when he declares: "too perfect a hell is almost as sterile as paradise."[65] Complete abjection inspires nothing.

§

The cult of the tortured artist — Susan Sontag argues that the modern author adopts the role that human sacrifice once held for religious faith. Their sacrifice affirms the strength of the religion or the common belief system. This functions best when the artist leaves a record of their suffering (Sontag offers the example of Cesare Pavese; Sylvia Plath would be another), though biographers will also fill the gap and explore with considerable interest the unhappy circumstances of less tragic figures. Religious sacrifice, Sontag writes, was governed by "the economy

63 Georges Bataille, "Appendix: The Author's Foreword [1957]," in *Blue of Noon*, trans. Harry Mathews (Penguin, 2012), 105.

64 Bataille, "Appendix: The Author's Foreword [1957]," 105. Emphasis original.

65 E.M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, trans. Richard Howard (Arcade Publishing, 2012), 65.

of salvation."[66] This has now become "the economy of art."[67] Only, for art there is no hereafter, and so no salvation; the artist's hereafter is only a memory, a trace, the fragile guarantee that their fame, or notoriety, will endure on Earth. The tortured artist will be seen to act out their affirmation of the value of art but within a metaphysical framework which is poorly articulated, if not threadbare. Its high priests (Matthew Arnold, Samuel Coleridge, John Ruskin) have long been treated as outmoded.

The Intellectual and Excess

Suffering intellectuals are rarely celebrated for their pains (Robert Burton would be an early exception). The attitude of the educated toward intellectuals tends to simplicity — when they are not suspicious of the intellectual in a state of health, the educated are indifferent before their immiseration.

§

The reason why intellectuals of the more abstract, or impenetrable variety, are treated with suspicion, is that they position their thinking "outside a computable reality,"[68] or so Barthes claims in his anatomization of anti-intellectualism. The intellect cannot be grasped, or seen, or measured, which makes it either dangerous or irrelevant.

The breeding ground of anti-intellectualism, or what might today be called "populism," is typically assumed to be among the lower orders of society. And yet, Barthes situates its origins a little higher, with the petit bourgeoisie, the lowest rung of the bourgeois class. But it might also thrive even higher still, with the bourgeois parent, for instance, who divides a child's free time

66 Susan Sontag, "The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Penguin, 2009), 42.

67 Ibid.

68 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies: The Complete Edition*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (Hill & Wang, 2012), 93.

into "productive" and so "educational" activities. This computable realm is the home of a common sense, no-nonsense view of the world which, "in order to see clearly," writes Barthes, "must first blind itself, refuse to go beyond appearances."[69] It takes for granted "the propositions of 'reality'" and declares "anything which risks substituting an explanation for a retort to be null and void."[70]

§

Most so-called intellectual work is indeed an indulgence and the educated are usually wrong to be suspicious. They are generally mistaken when they imagine that an intellectual's work could present them with anything more threatening than a waste of institutional resources. Where might an intellectual be found today who could say, with Barthes, that "the intellectual's function is to criticise bourgeois language within the bourgeoisie's very regnum," that its purpose is to "decompose bourgeois (and petit-bourgeois) ideology" from within.[71] Intellectual work might be parasitic — this is what the ivory tower metaphor really envisages, a tower filled with parasites — yet which of our intellectuals still pose a danger to their host?

§

"Rich or poor," Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write, "each language always implies a deterritorialization of the mouth, the tongue, and the teeth."[72] The mouth cannot eat and talk at the same time; it has to give up the domain of eating to the domain of speech if only between mouthfuls. It is possible to eat and write, of course. But for Deleuze and Guattari the disjunc-

69 Ibid., 94.
70 Ibid.
71 Barthes, "The Indictment Periodically Lodged…," in *The Rustle of Language*, 343.
72 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 19.

ture between eating and writing is even greater. This is because "writing goes further in transforming words into things capable of competing with food […]. To speak, and above all to write, is to fast."[73]

§

Artaud developed a hungry look, or an emaciated one — the mask of a man who has hungered too long. When he was still young and his cheeks were not yet at the full extent of their collapse, Artaud wrote of his hope "to derive from what we call culture ideas, whose living power is the same as hunger."[74] Which is not to say that every product of our mysterious inner life must be referred back to base impulses, hunger chief among them. Rather, it is important "not to waste the pure energy of being hungry simply on satisfying that immediate need."[75] The one who hungers directs these energies elsewhere, creates hungers elsewhere.

§

Bataille, as we have seen, was drawn to everything that is base. The route to sacred experience lay, in part, along the enteric passage.

Diogenes famously performed his indecent act after he stopped talking, that is to say, once he had demonstrated rhetorical accomplishment before his soon-to-be appalled audience. There was a pause between the act of culture and the act of nature. There may be some potential, now, to exceed even Diogenes, to overcome this pause, and invest the intellectual work of culture in the lowest places. Following Bataille, cultural artifacts — novels, philosophies, works of art — have become ripe for redeployment, in all contexts, even excremental ones.

73 Ibid., 20.
74 Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, 3.
75 Ibid.

This is what Bataille offers and the offer itself is worth hearing. The listener may come to see how all other options, all non-excremental literary outputs, become telling in their restraints.

§

We must oppose, "the insane constriction imposed on the idea of culture," writes Artaud.[76] That is to say, its elements need to be reformed, reactualized, and not simply jettisoned. Here Artaud exhibits extraordinary faith in his notion of culture — mystical, intense — which will return, which can never be eliminated. Even when cataclysms occur (such as the destruction of the library at Alexandria), these events may to an extent be welcomed for clearing away a certain fustiness and allowing for renewal, or so Artaud suggests.

The Idea

Intellectual decorum is the most tasteless of good tastes in the face of disaster.

In *Blue of Noon* the ex-philosophy teacher Antoine outlines the "details of an argument that has," he admits, left him "in the depths of perplexity."[77] He was prompted to think these most difficult thoughts by the "arduous meditations" that have engrossed his stepdaughter Lazare over the last few months. The "difficulty" he decides "lies not in the extremely skilful — and in my view, persuasive — arguments that she has utilized with a view to revealing the dead end into which history is being led by the events that are unfolding before our eyes."[78] Rather, the main challenge confronting someone such as himself, is how to

76 Ibid., 5.

77 Georges Bataille, *Blue of Noon*, trans. Harry Mathews (Penguin, 2012), 39.

78 Ibid. Bataille's novel was written in 1935 and finishes by anticipating the "rising tide of murder" (104).

respond to these particular end times and remain an intellectually respectable entity.

§

Marshlands, writes André Gide in his afterword, "is the story of an idea, more than of anything else; it is the story of the spiritual malaise that that idea causes."[79] An idea is not "an aspect of life," it is "part of a fever, part of a semblance of life."[80] To the extent that books are driven by ideas, they are inimical to life.

This afterword should not be treated as a plain argument that Gide appends to his work of fiction. Rather, it is an ironic appendage to a book that is full of ideas. This afterword is written from the perspective of the protagonist, not Gide. So when he writes, "Moreover, I like every book to include its own refutation, but hidden,"[81] we are faced with the prospect of a book that does not merely contain its own hidden refutation. We are also faced by the suggestion, the idea, that a book which presents itself as containing its own refutation is even more radically, or at least absurdly, self-undermining. The idea of a book containing its own refutation must be self-refuting too: a dizzying prospect.

Gide has this kind of total self-annihilation in mind when he writes that the book and the idea(s) it presents "should be so entirely self-contained that it is impossible to destroy any of it without destroying the whole, leaving nothing behind, no residue, no ashes."[82] Until that point the book must "stay calmly in equilibrium until a more ardent spark comes along that can reduce it in an instant, annihilate it, at least to our eyes, into a volatile disappearance, a subtilized gas. — A laughing gas."[83] This would be a book that cannot be carved up, instrumentalized, partially read,

79 André Gide, *Marshlands*, trans. Damion Searls (New York Review Books, 2021), 103.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 104.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 104–5.

and coopted piecemeal. It would be an utterly threatening book that could turn to ash and laughter at any moment.

Marshlands is not such a book. Rather, this is a passing vision offered within *Marshlands,* a vision which would be a test case perhaps for a kind of book, for the sort of book that would be needed to disrupt the cultures of appreciation which surround and attenuate so-called challenging books.

§

"Suppose we force ourselves to see to the bottom of words? We see nothing — each of them, detached from the expansive and fertile soul, being null and void. The power of the intelligence functions by projecting a certain luster upon them, by polishing them and making them glitter; this power, erected into a system, is called *culture* — pyrotechnics against a night sky of nothingness," writes Emil Cioran.[84]

§

"People think of ideas as too much like dead things, subject to logic; actually they are alive," writes Gide.[85] But the life of the idea is not the same thing as the life of a person, the life that everyone lives most of the time, when walking up the stairs, or going to the toilet, or doing any number of mundane, everyday tasks. "They live at our expense, in our brains."[86] If the life of the educated is, in part, the life of ideas — of the exchange, the inspection, the sharing, the development (and the killing) of ideas — it is by this account, a grotesque life, and the instilling of ideas in the young is a grotesque activity.

"What is an idea like?," writes Gide. "It is a cancerous bacteria that I put into a child's brain; it doesn't grow, I assume, or if it does, it will be directly from the child's brain: that is where it will

84 Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, 20. Emphasis original.
85 Gide, *Marshlands*, 104.
86 Ibid.

put down roots, permeate it with sickness, suck out the child's health for its own parasitic life."[87] Here Gide persists with the idea that ideas are, in effect, potentially dangerous entities. Gide presents in his book the idea of an idea as something which cannot be exchanged or grappled without risk.

The life of ideas is generally not lived this way, however. The educated have become adept at immunizing themselves from the eruptive implications of the ideas they handle.

§

Tityrus, the subject of *Marshlands* (that is to say, the subject of the fictional book, *Marshlands,* that appears within Gide's book by the same name), reappears in *Prometheus Unbound*:

"In the beginning was Tityrus," the chapter opens. Tityrus is surrounded on all sides by marshland, but has a seed planted in his head, a seed that sprouts with God's help and grows into a little plant, a plant that sucks all the moisture from the earth, and, as it becomes a larger plant and eventually a tree, causes the marshland to recede as the land is drained about it. When it is big enough to cast a shadow, Tityrus takes pleasure in that. When he is not tending to the tree and the land in which it grows, Tityrus rests. But once the tree reaches a certain size, Tityrus alone cannot care for it, water it, prune it, or indeed clean the caterpillars from it. The tree produces a variety of fruit which must be harvested, but again it is too much for Tityrus. There is ample reason, then, to employ "some boys" to do the various jobs, but they then "needed to be paid, and Tityrus, to keep track of the payments, needed a bookkeeper" and a "cashier."[88] Various conflicts arose "between the pruner and the trimmer" which necessitated the work of an "arbitrator flanked by a brace of lawyers, one pro and one contra," and then "a secretary to take down their judgements," an "archivist" too for the keeping of records.[89]

87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 107.
89 Ibid.

The society about the tree, which was after all just the manifestation of an idea, "where this idea was the seed, and this seed was the Idea," grew and grew, and so houses were built with streets between that needed to be policed, and thus "there had to be police" in this world.[90] The work remained beyond Tityrus, and he next chose "a deputy, who then had Tityrus elected mayor."[91] The oak remained at the center of the city and the land that had been drained by the roots, which, despite its size, and the presence of the buildings "had never stopped being the plain."[92] And under that oak Tityrus still lived and "dispensed justice on the shady side and answered the call of nature on the sunny side […]. And Tityrus was happy, for he felt that his life was both useful to others and excessively busy."[93]

Such is the grotesque potential of an idea, one that grows, changes, transforms, and assembles a whole range of accompanying ideas around it, each one another artifice owing its existence to the requirements of its neighbor. The purpose of the idea is not stated. The idea is self-referential even if it is never self-sufficient. As a structure that reaches outward and transforms the surface of the planet, it carries its own weight (and copes with itself) only because of the complexity, the interminable, labyrinthine extent of its consequences.

It is perhaps the case, then, that the idea of civilization is unlike the ideal book that destroys itself (or threatens to do so, at any moment, because it is so tightly self-contained and contains its own refutation). Civilization cannot be destroyed that way, will not destroy itself, because it is too extended, too superficial, too faceted, angled, bent, contorted, and comfortable with its own refutations and self-contradictions for any one incursion to do it to pieces. Instead, the decay of such an idea is long, painful, and drawn out. Educated existence is inclined, in this way, to ecocide.

90 Ibid., 106–7.
91 Ibid., 107.
92 Ibid., 108.
93 Ibid.

The Boss

In a few short strides, Raoul Vaneigem passes from the first humans to today's bosses. A contemporary anthropologist may complain about the details, but the connections remain interesting.

"As soon as a band of humans marked out a hunting ground and claimed exclusive ownership of it," writes Vaneigem, "they found themselves confronted by a hostility which was no longer that of wild animals, harsh weather, inhospitable territory, or disease, but rather that of other human groups."[94] Rather than killing their neighbors, they engaged in relations of exchange with one another in order to better survive. "Between the 'hunting and gathering' stage and the coming of agriculture, human clans were […] beholden to three kinds of exchange: the exchange of women, the exchange of food, the exchange of blood."[95] Eventually, presumably in the Neolithic, it was necessary to invoke a "supreme planner" who would become the guarantor of these exchanges — a God who would bring order and sense to the chaos of their ad-hoc relations. The masters or chieftains made their own sacrifices to the myth, to the God they depended upon to underwrite all transactions. They sacrificed themselves by the labor of ruling and making war, where a King or a local chieftain might very well be killed in combat or usurped. But there came a point, Vaneigem writes, when a "make-believe" sacrifice would do.[96] "When the God of the Christians delegated his son to the human world, he supplied generations of bosses with a perfect model with which to authenticate their own supposed sacrifice."[97]

Vaneigem does not expand upon the nature of this "perfect model" but it might well include leaders who take upon themselves the sins of the institution — who might even claim to suf-

94 Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (PM Press, 2012), 61.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., 61–62.
97 Ibid., 62.

fer for it and to its benefit. This is the troubled leader who suffers worse, or at least with greater moral heaviness than any other. This is the figurehead who "takes responsibility" for everything that has happened during their leadership and perhaps resigns from their position but pays a price that is not even remotely comparable to the assumed crime.

Outside the realms of government, the lesser figure of the university vice-chancellor fits this model rather too well, representing the highest form of the pained academic who advances in (apparent) torment and comes to embody the sins of the institution, sins which are projected as its necessary violences. This absolves nobody, however, and nobody is forgiven, unless the academic boss achieves a truly daemonic reputation, in which case everyone is absolved, and everyone is forgiven. Below the despised leader, every single submission to rule, every act of compliance, every sycophantic move, is then justified as an act of survival, and the boss remains necessary, indeed essential.

Bourgeois Values and Delinquency

"Apartments offer themselves to the burglar with painful immodesty," writes Genet in *Funeral Rites*. "Without looking for them, we find the very personal habits of the bourgeois, and I can say for a fact that I have opened drawers in which there were underpants with shit stains, and hard, dried, crumpled socks that emitted their sad fragrance when spread out."[98] Bourgeois values, including those indicating a preference for hygiene, neatness, and order, may well organize bourgeois self-perception more than they do bourgeois actuality.

§

98 Genet, *Funeral Rites*, 211.

The bourgeoisie is driven to exnominate itself, Barthes claims.[99] It endeavors to spread its values, its ways of seeing, so that these values and those ways of seeing are no longer identified with a political class but are attached to humanity as a whole. One might add that to the extent the terms "bourgeois(ie)" now appear antiquated, perhaps anachronistic, it has succeeded.

§

"The bourgeoisie for its part does not dominate. It exploits. It does not *subject* people so much as *wear them out*," writes Vaneigem.[100]

§

Living at odds with the world and its requirements is a revolutionary precondition for Vaneigem. To the extent they are maladjusted, artists may bear witness to the contrived, inessential makeup of society: "[U]nder the crust of words and concepts, the living reality of maladjustment to the world is always crouched and ready to spring."[101] But artists themselves are not essential to bringing about the end of the bourgeois era, and the maladjusted do not have to be artists to demonstrate its failures. Vaneigem considers the bourgeois a mere "transitional phase" between feudalism and a new, postcapitalist world order.[102] Artists can make something of their neuroses, but the revolutionary thrust of maladjustment is modest and simple. Nothing, neither words nor gods can decently cover it up, "this commonplace creature roams naked in railway stations and vacant lots"[103] — another consequence of the alienation of life and the inability of bourgeois culture to develop values worth living for.

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99 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 250.
100 Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, 38.
101 Ibid., 8.
102 Ibid., 59.
103 Ibid., 8.

§

"Naturally I visited the greatest museums […] and studied what they contained with the greatest intensity […] and it soon seemed to me as if these museums contained nothing but painted helplessness, painted incompetence, painted failure, the bungled part of the world," writes Bernhard in *Old Masters*.[104]

§

"Who can fail to notice the alarming persistence with which 'socialist' countries continue to organize life along bourgeois lines?" writes Vaneigem, "Everywhere it's hats off to family, marriage, sacrifice, work, inauthenticity."[105] Bourgeois life, in the East, or the West, involves constant, small acts of degradation. Knowledge of that degradation, of how humanity has become reduced in its desires and its hopes, knowledge of the precise mechanisms of humiliation that keep existence hobbled and stunted, "is of less consequence than the actual experience of such degradation," for which, Vaneigem claims, each reader need look no further than themselves.[106] Revolution is built "only on the foundation of individual despair and its supersession."[107]

§

"I do not believe that I have a special vocation for misery. I just happen to notice that it does not disgust me," writes the anonymous author of Mihail Sebastian's curiously unclassifiable, *Fragments from a Found Notebook*.[108]

§

104 Bernhard, *Old Masters*, 53.
105 Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, 15.
106 Ibid., 19.
107 Ibid.
108 Mihail Sebastian, *Fragments from a Found Notebook*, trans. Christina Tudor-Sideri (Sublunary Editions, 2020), 11.

Against bourgeois intellectual culture, which suggests that the world is understandable and thereby governable, a situationist revolt of the sort Vaneigem, Debord, and others urged for, demands immediacy and spontaneity. It is premised on the idea that individuals can bring themselves to realize just how damaged they are and will somehow be able to identify more authentic modes of life when they see it. It is necessary to come to know and be able to identify the feeling "of never being ourselves," as Vaneigem puts it.[109]

All the Continuity a World Can Sustain

The rebel must become familiar with the feeling "of never really being inside your own skin" in order to wish to return to it, writes Vaneigem.[110]

Vaneigem imagines a man who notices that he is being carried along in a crowd that only he can see, who "screams out in an attempt to break the spell, to call himself back to himself, to get back inside his own skin."[111] This is a curious metaphor. The entire premise of revolution is here based on the idea that within the skin a happy life can be lived. No wonder Vaneigem lists Freud as one of the "thinkers imbued with fatalism."[112] It would seem that Vaneigem's retreat to the borders of the skin — the limits of true individuality — will also not allow for the possibility that the skin must be penetrated in order to expand experience and escape entrapment. This would be Bataille's wager.

Bataille puts forward a more lacerating vision of revolutionary consciousness raising, one that will deliver an experience of the outside. This is what he calls eroticism — an experience of excess which has little to do with the erotic in the conventional sense of sexual pleasure or arousal. For Bataille, pleasure

109 Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, 20.
110 Ibid., 20.
111 Ibid., 24.
112 Ibid., 33.

needs to be taken to its limit where it threatens to disperse, to ruin and annihilate the organism concerned. Bataille's eroticism challenges individuation, and undermines discontinuity, where discontinuity is the basic division that separates human beings from one another, that confines individuals within limits, and finally declares this life within limits reasonable. Eroticism reaches toward the realm of continuity from which discontinuous beings emerged and, as part of their emergence and as a consequence of their submission, was the route by which they became educated.

The experience of eroticism is denied by educated culture just as it is denied by religion, and this, for Bataille, is what helps to produce the highly restricted, closed in, overly cautious modes of existence that have come to be identified with the civilized. Educated culture and religious culture, each remain safely within the domain of discontinuous beings including gods personified.[113] Taboos are established and placed beyond inspection — against killing, against sex, and so on — taboos that oddly, but necessarily, propel some individuals to exceed their limits only to reaffirm them.[114]

For Bataille, eroticism provides access to experience, to a realm that exceeds discontinuity, including the conventionally "erotic" (the domain of desire, pornography, and kink), and embraces the unknowable darkness from which individuals coalesce as they are conceived in the womb, consigned to separation as an independent, proliferating mass of cells, and as they are further individuated by upbringing, by education, and by culture, which attaches names, and teaches the separation of selves. The yearning of one body for another, the desire to possess the other, to become the other, is an artifice of civi-

113 "God is a composite being possessed of the continuity I am talking about [and so a being of unthinkable horror] […] God is nevertheless represented by biblical and rational theology alike as a personal being, as a creator distinct from the generality of things created." Bataille, *Eroticism*, 22.

114 "Transgression piled upon transgression will never abolish the taboo, just as though the taboo were never anything but the means of cursing gloriously whatever it forbids." Ibid, 48.

lized upbringing as much as it is an effect of a more basic desire to break discontinuities and return to a continuous state. It is a death drive of sorts. Eroticism may also appear in encounters with death, as a kind of delirium, where the discontinuous self begins to experience the prospect of its disintegration into matter.[115]

The delirium brought about by encounters with death — experienced erotically, encountered mystically — is surely nothing close to the experience of dying itself, which is, one might imagine, as ignoble and diminishing as it is regular, representing little more than pained and clumsy last moments in consciousness. By contrast, as a focus of meditation, ritualistic arousal, or artistic practice, death presents itself as an attractive or at least formidable prospect, and suggests that the spectacle of death, the death of the educated, their death as they imagine it, could conjure a space in which the educated might encounter the prospect of their end. This apocalyptic cultural vision, which may appear in literature, or art, might appeal to the residual romanticism of educated culture and encourage meditation on its limits. It might encourage some abandonment of the discontinuities that bourgeois culture weaves into its structures of security, safety, and exclusion. It might seek to dissolve some of the many borders that have been reinforced, if not diligently defended and accentuated, by educated culture. As Bataille writes: "What we desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain."[116] This does beg the question of whether sociality could ever sustain the excesses of eroticism, even if such a question, and questions like it, must always necessarily reflect the restricted outlook of those who have been overly socialized themselves.

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115 As Bataille writes, "The most violent thing of all for us is death which jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being." Ibid., 16.

116 Ibid., 19.

Where does eroticism appear for the educated? What are the experiences that might lead the educated to erotic reflection? Under more favorable conditions, these experiences might be found in precisely everything that troubles the educated, that makes the educated worry about the survival of their culture, their milieu, their comforts. Their eroticism would manifest "as the disequilibrium in which the being consciously calls [their] own existence in question."[117] The educated might, in effect, explore every moment, however ordinary, that suggests the educated person is not secure in their being, in their culture, and that the whole lot might be about to slide into what it fears; fascism, environmental collapse, populism, or more gently, the closure of the local museum or library, or the under-funding of the arts, or the struggle to maintain the "serious" press, or the difficulties facing publishers (and authors) of serious fiction. Often trifling in themselves, these problems are felt urgently, their urgency deriving its strength from some residual sense of the end of educated culture they rumor. It is on such meditation which accumulates so many reasons for doubt that eroticism in the day-to-day culture of the educated might be located. In its extended form — developed, drawn out, dwelled upon with melancholic insistence — this would inspire meditation on the death of the educated person, the figure of educated culture. It would invite a confrontation with the transience and illusion of educated being. It would bring the educated to an experience that abuts the vast indifference of those yet to be educated and the universe beyond to everything educated culture has achieved and proudly asserts. This is the knowledge, felt and not simply known, that the end of all that goes by the name civilization will be greeted by cold silence, a cosmic indifference that is, itself, beyond anything the educated can conceive of or name. The conditions are not favorable to this kind of experience, of course, when the educated have so many ways of fending it off. Educated hubris is unlikely to be punctured, and educated existence will resist any kind of reset.

117 Ibid., 31.

Perhaps it was a lack of patience, or simply a more acute sense of the futility of gentler methods, which led Artaud to propose that only a highly improvised and cruel theater would do, where each expression on stage is only used once and does not solidify into what can be regarded as script. This is how Artaud envisages the final death of an essentially moribund culture in the arrival of new, transitory forms that express the pain and cruelty of their present and which shock the anatomy. This theater of cruelty need not be bloody, or dwell in gore ("as soon as I said 'cruelty' everyone took it to mean 'blood'"), nor must it repeat the cruelty that bodies inflict on one another ("it has nothing to do with […] hacking at each other's bodies, carving up our individual anatomies, or like ancient Assyrian Emperors, posting sackfuls of human ears, noses or neatly dissected nostrils"). The cruelty Artaud imagines and seeks to produce on stage is far more difficult to effect than that. The challenge is to present and make felt "the far more terrible, essential cruelty objects can practise on us."[118] This is the cruelty of an unfeeling universe that Artaud would reveal to undermine our resort to the comforts and consolations of culture. Artaud does not commend chaos, bloodshed, or despair, even if the capacity to despair still must be acquired.

The Handshake

The handshake, emblem of bourgeois dissimulation — "What guarantees are they trying to seal," Vaneigem writes, "these hands clasped to the right, to the left, everywhere, with a liberality that seems like a compensation for a complete lack of conviction?"[119] The handshake, as Vaneigem rightly identifies, suggests that social harmony is ascendent, that life is orderly and reasonable, convivial, and humane. "What could be more disturbing," Vaneigem continues, "than this need to convince

118 Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, 57.
119 Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, 17.

ourselves of these lies, to believe them out of habit, to reaffirm them with the strength of our grip?"[120] Admittedly, the custom is more common in Continental Europe where handshakes are exchanged between friends as between business associates. Those involved must hold firm and do what they can to avoid coming across as limp. This is the masculine inheritance of the gesture for sure. So too does it inherit something from the elemental display that each participant is not holding a weapon, although the hand (if not limp) may still be considered one.

Vaneigem looked about and saw handshakes everywhere, exchanged with appalling regularity. This bourgeois convention, he wrote, is "the simplest expression of the social contract," a contract that, for Vaneigem, is the reduction of all human relations to relations of exchange.[121] Vaneigem presents bourgeois society as one in which few people will look squarely at each other (and perhaps here he only imagines the male gaze): their eyes rarely meet, since when they do "they become uneasy, as though discerning their own empty, soulless reflection in the other person's pupils."[122] These eyes have been hollowed out by the drudgery of work, the commute, and the reign of the commodity which draws the eyes to what can be possessed, each product carrying its own (false) promise of happiness. This is what the superficial gesture of the handshake serves to bridge. But commercial overtones ("of course, the handshake clinches a deal"[123]) are only part of its significance. Vaneigem insists again on the "energetically reiterated affirmation of social harmony" that the handshake enacts.[124] Each handshake represents another attempt to trick the senses, to blunt perception "and habituate it to the emptiness of the spectacle," once "*things* are the only reality we can see."[125]

120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid., 18.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
125 Ibid.

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The fact that the English are less given to a social handshake than their German or French peers, for instance, leads itself to a variety of explanations including this being a product of a certain English squeamishness before the prospect of skin-to-skin contact. It is notable that the English have come to hug one another instead, pat one another's backs and look, as they do, over the shoulder. Is this hugging again a typically masculine gesture, or does it take a typically masculine form in these contexts, a further consequence of the male lack Solanas identifies? In any case, the handshake as contract is replaced by the abstract hug, a true sign of insincerity. And here, as in other respects, the English have learned to look to their American cousins for direction.

Life by Subscription

"I have compared myself more than once, and with some shame, to people who are very staid and who, every day, simply do their duty, are thrifty and sober, and give their children a good education. Looking at them, I have said, 'Here is how I should have lived,'" writes Henri Roorda in *My Suicide.*[126]

Bourgeois virtues should be acknowledged because "some of the virtues that staid people possess are of inestimable value."[127] The bourgeois works hard so that their children will have to work less hard for the same material comforts (or so the logic goes). The bourgeois strives and instils the ethos of striving, of self-advancement, of being a "good citizen," in the children they produce. These are the children they must engender (or adopt and coopt) if they are to reproduce and maintain the social edifice within which their careers are lived out and their striving materializes. "They live prudently, only allowing small, authorized things into their lives; they monitor their gestures and

126 Henri Roorda, *My Suicide*, trans. Eva Richter (Spurl Editions, 2015), 26.
127 Ibid.

words; they never have great desires; they do not know elation and adoration. And respect often makes them dumb."[128] This is the system of conformity, of excluding alterity, that is also killing Roorda, or killing something in him. Bourgeois culture is always killing something in itself and in others, a form of killing that is largely obscured by its love of due process, the reasonable, and the respectful. But what gives it life, inasmuch as it lives? From where does bourgeois living, such as it is, draw its residual vitality? From the invigorating drill of its self-murder, perhaps? Roorda places himself outside bourgeois culture and on the side of disorder. "From time to time, disorder must break out in the world so that new things may be born. Disorder is always provoked by bad citizens, fanatics drunk with words."[129] Its traces can also be found in poetry, and music, in which Roorda finds solace.

To the extent it has any life to it, bourgeois culture outlives those it destroys, those like Roorda who live drunkenly and leave a book like *My Suicide* for the bourgeois to enjoy and, yes, perhaps also gently prod themselves with. Despite the place of the ordinary in bourgeois life, its presence does not preclude the bourgeois with a taste for culture, for the arts. This personage may even self-consciously place themselves at the edges of ordinary living, might think themselves perfectly un-bourgeois, bohemian in their way, but this individual *still pays the mortgage*, so to speak, and functions as the conduit through which Roorda and Roorda-like people are reabsorbed and made amenable. Bourgeois life may be stale, or entail a certain blandness, but it enlivens itself by coopting, and so diminishing, the atypical. Artists and thinkers are brought in as their aesthetic or conceptual offerings are celebrated in spite or perhaps even because of their alterity. As Roorda notes: "the Great Mechanic did not construct my little internal machine with much care. He for-

128 Ibid., 27.
129 Ibid.

got to put in a regulator"[130] — those who read his book can now thank him for it.

Worthy of mention too, perhaps, is that Roorda was also a schoolteacher, a "calling" which also killed him, a little bit, every day.

§

The Church dominated the whole system of the Middle Ages, writes Bataille, with its "profusion of useless ornaments," its vaulted interiors — such a waste of space — and its domineering edifices.[131] The Church paraded the resources it gathered, consumed into the making of something monstrous, a thing, an elaborate lump, which pointed beyond questions of direct utility or satisfactions of need. The Church was not a property investment. Its goal was set at the level of intangibles — the glory of God — and every finely carved piece of stone or wood it contained was a demonstration of its own particular taste for excess. Every component that went into its construction represented the hoarding of wealth and its divestment as, for want of a better word, Art.

In the period of modernity, the educated, for all their faults, cannot rise to a similar conceit which would place their own cultural achievements above the demands of utility. When the educated harp on about the importance of culture — of preserving the arts, great literature, historic sites, and so on — this is but a shadow of the commitment to architecture, to artisanry, to higher feeling, that the medieval Church once rose to.

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130 Ibid., 28.

131 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share,* Vol. I, trans. Robert Hurley (Zone Books, 2022), 132.

"The builders of cathedrals cared no more for posterity than did Sade," writes Vaneigem.[132] "Their salvation was guaranteed by God, as Sade's was guaranteed by himself. Neither Sade nor the builders of cathedrals needed a place in the museum of history. Both strove for a supreme state of being, not for the temporal survival of their work or for the admiration of centuries to come."[133] In this respect, according to Vaneigem, reverent builders and libertines may be contrasted to the bourgeois artist for whom history "is the earthly paradise of bourgeois spirituality."[134] This is what tempts the bourgeois artist to give up "the lived intensity of the creative moment in exchange for the durability of what he creates."[135] Too bad, then, that consumer society now moves so quickly from one aesthetic to another and "ensures that every aesthetic collapses before it can produce any masterpieces."[136] Vaneigem overstates his case, of course, because museums still exist and works of art are still pickled there.

§

"I slipped into art to get away from life," says Reger in Bernhard's *Old Masters*.[137]

§

Franz-Josef's father in Bernhard's *Extinction* has seen the great works — the Sistine Chapel, the Acropolis, and so on — but has only traveled under advice by the plans made for him by what Franz-Josef describes as "revolting individuals who called themselves art experts […], dreadful people with petit bourgeois minds and professorships […], appalling specimens from Vien-

132 Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, 95.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
135 Ibid., 96.
136 Ibid.
137 Bernhard, *Old Masters*, 150.

na" whom he "took to be cultured people."[138] So-called cultured people turn out to be slaves to a dead culture (or a culture that is dead to them) that they can only visit and will never experience in its fullness. Cultural artifacts — those things everyone "must see" — turn out to be facets of a broader framework, a set of injunctions that the educated, on their "brainless educational journeys," remain bound to. These dreadful people live by the laws laid down for them by their predecessors and never dream of making new laws to live by. Franz-Josef only respects his uncle, a man who also cut himself off from everything he was born into and did so for the sake of his own survival. This Uncle Georg "lived solely by his own laws, which he himself had made. And these self-made laws he was forever overturning."[139]

§

"These people — I mean your parents — haven't just taken out subscriptions for the theater and concerts: they live their whole lives on subscription." They live this way "because it's the done thing; not because they want to […]. And just as they clap in all the wrong places at the theater, so they clap in all the wrong places in their lives."[140] So says Uncle Georg describing the parents of Franz-Josef Murau in *Extinction.* But there are no right places to clap, at least not in Bernhard's work or his vision of the world. Every celebration is wrongly done, is announced at the wrong time, and is enjoyed by the wrong people.[141]

§

138 Bernhard, *Extinction*, 25.

139 Ibid., 22–23.

140 Ibid., 29.

141 Even the conclusion to *Extinction* is not worth a clap. Franz Murau makes a gift of his great estate, Wolfsegg, to the Jewish community in Vienna. But what kind of gift is that, after all, given how entangled Wolfsegg's past is with National Socialism.

In *Woodcutters* Bernhard lays into those who find themselves satisfied by what art, in its socially acceptable forms, has to offer. He takes aim at the "petit bourgeois" outlook of people who have been accepted by their artistic community, who consider themselves part of an art scene, and invite others to dinner parties where great names — Henrik Ibsen, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and so on — are thrown about. Art takes on a decorative function, "*bringing color*" to those who find themselves living in a "*drab municipal apartment*" living drab municipal lives.[142]

§

Woodcutters was initially pulped by court order as a result of a defamation lawsuit. Its narrator, who resembles a much younger Bernhard, scorns and satirizes his former associates and friends. All of them have sold out and have suffered a state-sponsored decline, a descent into cultural imbecility which is acted out personally and socially.

> All Austrian artists end up letting themselves be bought out by the state for its nefarious purposes, selling themselves to this vile, unprincipled, execrable state, and most of them start out that way […]. Artistic life in Austria is a road built by state opportunism out of people's baseness and mendacity, paved with scholarships and prizes, lined with decorations and distinctions, and leading to an honored grave in the Central Cemetery.[143]

This institutionally coopted, self-satisfied class of artists and careerists is absorbed within, and enclosed by, its own celebratory culture. It has become indifferent to suffering and tragedy. There is a tragic suicide in *Woodcutters* and it is the occasion for an "artistic dinner." The narrator, an outsider now, must surely exceed what he scorns if only in contempt. But this, for Bern-

142 Bernhard, *Woodcutters*, 32. Emphases original.
143 Ibid., 147.

hard, is impossible. There is no outside, no prospect of escape, no alternative world on offer here. Indeed this point is made so relentlessly it ends up inviting laughter. Bernhard's work artfully exploits its own enclosures, its entrapment, since Bernhard implicates himself, or at least his narrators in the cultural decrepitude he identifies.[144] Bernhard's writing demonstrates its awareness of how it can only ever participate in what it denounces. And despite their appeal, his books resist the temptation to create lasting monuments of culture. They are avowedly demented, pleasurably negative in their orientation, and proceed by way of an inner corruption, a laughably vertiginous manifestation of immanent cultural, intellectual rot.

Teaching the End

"Nothing is to be expected from the end of civilization, from its clinical death. Such a thing can only be of interest to historians. It's a *fact,* and it must be translated into a *decision* […]. To decide for the death of civilization, then to work out *how* it will happen: only decision will rid us of the corpse,"[145] write the authors of *The Coming Insurrection.*

It is hard to imagine where these historians would be writing from or who their audience would be. The end of civilization cannot be studied, and in a very basic sense, cannot be taught.

§

"Knowledge has no more desperate enemy than the educative instinct," writes Cioran.[146]

144 There are numerous examples. For instance, in *Woodcutters* the narrator declares, "we are not one jot better than the people we constantly find objectionable and insufferable, those repellent people with whom we want to have as few dealings as possible, though, if we are honest, we do have dealings with them and are no different from them." Ibid., 178.

145 Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Semiotext(e), 2009), 94. Emphases original.

146 Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, 25.

Including knowledge of the end, one might add. The educative instinct is its enemy too, given that the educative instinct is tied to the work of reproduction, to perpetuation, and deferral.

§

At its best teaching is a revelation which begins as a personal project of undoing. This is extraordinarily difficult, and the entire machinery of teaching is against it. The historically accreted work of education is geared in the other direction as it falls into the work of person formation, which is to say, person entrapment.

§

Franz-Josef Murau's basic lesson in *Extinction* is to "oppose everything,"[147] first of all his own parents. His student, Gambetti, will become alienated from his parents too, and their ideas, just as Franz-Josef became alienated from Wolfsegg. He teaches Gambetti that "the world must be annihilated before it's restored, since it's impossible to renew it without first annihilating it."[148] Murau confesses that he "can't say how this is to be done,"[149] only that it is necessary, adding the crucial detail that annihilation also means "annihilating, and extinguishing myself."[150] This is annihilation by "self-dissection."[151] There is a vision of undoing here, a specifically Western vision perhaps. Murau also remains the archetypal educator, the educator in its early form operating since antiquity as personal guide, as philosopher patronized by the powerful, brought into their home to round off and "finish" their children.

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147 Bernhard, *Extinction*, 106.
148 Ibid., 104.
149 Ibid.
150 Ibid., 117.
151 Ibid.

Intuitions of the end — "Explanation: another word that I need to suppress from my vocabulary. This word makes no sense to me," writes Sebastian in his *Fragments from a Found Notebook*.[152] But it is impossible not to make a lesson of it.

"M.D., doctor and psychologist, claims that I despise my intelligence," Sebastian's protagonist continues.[153] "No, that is not true. I put it in its place: that is all. I know it is agile and skillful. But I also know that life (this life beaten by the winds, harassed, restless, this life that I hate and love with the same passion) can very well do without it."[154] He makes a lesson of that too. Which produces the realization (another lesson) that the intelligence must not be elevated — no greatness ever came of it. Intelligence can be deployed as "an act of politeness," a performance before the civilized, but that is about it.[155]

Democratic Society

Modern democracies function and persist by the continued "exteriorization of their originary violence," writes Achille Mbembe.[156] The Western liberal outlook is built upon and constituted by the elimination of an "uncivilized," "unreasonable" Other. This is how it sanctions (because it relies upon) extreme acts of extrajudicial violence and extermination, as well as all other activities which inflict social and political death upon prescribed groups both within and outside its borders. The Western educated person, as figured by Mbembe, is enclosed within a cycle of fantastical projections and attendant purges: "Wanting not to remember anything any longer, least of all their own crimes and

152 Sebastian, *Fragments from a Found Notebook*, 12.
153 Ibid., 13.
154 Ibid.
155 Ibid.
156 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Duke University Press, 2019), 27.

misdeeds, they dream up bad objects that return to haunt them and that they then seek violently to rid themselves of."[157]

Mbembe's assessment of the West is rightfully severe and has the admirable quality of combining analysis with invective. For instance, when a Western democratic state talks about the "rights of man and the citizen" we find ourselves faced with an "open-air putrefaction that no longer stiffens its phallus."[158] And yet, Mbembe's invective and argument directed at the hypocrisies of the Western liberal outlook perhaps cannot adequately explain how its educated representatives (those who should or claim to know better) remain sufficiently comfortable, or comfortable enough to continue, in their own selves (even, or particularly when presented by an argument such as Mbembe's). More disturbing still is the possibility that the moral outlooks, and the Western interiorities they symptomize, are not half as corrupted as one might like to think. For indeed, the very wish that Mbembe describes, the wish not to remember their own crimes and misdeeds, suggests that the educated are not quite so far gone as he elsewhere suggests, when arguing, for instance, that for the so-called civilized representative of a Western liberal outlook, "moral consciousness is ousted, when it is not simply decommissioned."[159]

The educated would prefer not to dream of bad objects either, one might suggest, and would rather let the dark underside of the democratic project do its work on the "nocturnal body"[160] under its own steam. Even better, the educated might continue to blame the masses, the under-educated horde (as Mbembe sometimes does too), for being lured into, and thereby facilitating, new nativisms, for instance, at the expense of their (still assumed-to-be) inherently progressive, cosmopolitan outlook. Moral consciousness will be preserved. Indeed, if educated culture is to retain the ability to comfort itself as the conditions

157 Ibid., 2.
158 Ibid., 59.
159 Ibid., 56.
160 Ibid., 22.

facing the global underclass worsen, it will depend more and more on the inner citadels, the gated recesses that the educated construct. Moral probity does not disappear under these conditions, it is more effectively walled off.

§

Debord once described "self-proclaimed democratic society" as "the realization of a *fragile perfection.*"[161] This is curious. Although it is often considered fragile, democratic society in the age of the spectacle is rarely described as "perfect," not even by its defenders. But when Debord uses the word, it is no compliment.

Democratic society is *fragile,* Debord writes, "because it has great difficulty managing its dangerous technological expansion."[162] And it is *perfect,* because those who govern can be assured that they will manage to change hardly a thing. "For the first time in contemporary Europe," Debord writes in 1988, "no party or faction of a party even tries to pretend that they wish to change anything significant."[163]

Which raises the problem of where this all leaves the educated person (here in the more restricted but still quite open sense, meaning, *the educated middle classes*). The educated person is of course aware of and sometimes pained by the rise of the commodity, by material excrescences that educated people both desire and then bemoan as their leftovers pollute the planet. But how does the educated person exist in the fragile perfection of a so-called democracy, when technological expansion seems beyond control, and when no party pretends to offer anything significantly different to the existing course of world destruction? Debord provides a clue in the closing pages of his book when he argues that "the subjected" (those who are subjected to the spectacle) actually find themselves "living in a world which

161 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (Verso, 1998), 21. Emphasis original.
162 Ibid.
163 Ibid.

in fact has been eliminated."[164] That is to say, the educated still live within the eliminated worlds of their predecessors. Their so-called rulers may be similarly deluded, also carrying the ideas and presuppositions of earlier ages that clog up their thinking. In the case of politicians and statespersons, this might include continued denial of the fact that the state "can no longer be led strategically."[165] The powerful are able to cause considerable suffering, chaos, and confusion, but they cannot rule any longer.

§

For educated people — or at least for those who feed lower down the food-chain of power and influence — thinking is clogged up with another idea. When Debord writes, "We have dispensed with that disturbing conception, which was dominant for over two hundred years, in which a society was open to criticism or transformation," the educated person will raise an eyebrow.[166] When Debord claims that this is because "all argument has become useless"[167] (under the conditions of the spectacle), the educated person will raise a finger and begin to argue and debate. Their continued ability to engage in debate of a sort is taken as evidence against its futility.

§

The growing obsolescence of books might be welcomed. Even if conversation "is almost dead, and soon so too will be those who knew how to speak," the activity of reading still recalls an older world.[168] For Debord, "reading demands making judgements at every line; and is the only access to the wealth of pre-spectacular human experience."[169] It is hard to know exactly what Debord

164 Ibid., 87.
165 Ibid., 20.
166 Ibid., 21.
167 Ibid., 21–22.
168 Ibid., 29.
169 Ibid.

means by this, but it might seem that he, like most educated people, can still find solace in books. Books can still make demands that cut through the laziness and apathy produced by the spectacle. Those who read them can still do so alone and without immediately broadcasting themselves to others. As physical objects they remain archaic and mysterious. As an outmoded technology, the book requires effort, and that effort increases the older and more obsolete a book becomes. This technology does not automatically sync up to others but isolates the reader within the labor of making sense of the material at hand. The great frustration of reading is that no primer, or reading group, or commentary, or critique, will ever adequately explain the text it sets out to decipher. This is also, for Debord, it seems, the still disruptive potential of reading, to isolate us in our judgments, to recall us to an experience of what it was like to make judgments alone, to stand and act by decision without immediately submitting each move to the desire for broader acknowledgment, for a reaction, for recognition. There is still potential here, in other words, to access the wealth of a world where alternative possibilities for human existence were not forbidden, frozen, in a fixed inertia, a stasis that denies the possibility of another way of being.

Postscript

Educated People is a product of walking, years spent finding routes across the empty moors around Bleaklow in northern England. This is where the book was conceived and where it existed for a long time in its unwritten form. Our walks made possible a more associative, less domesticated mode of thinking, unpreoccupied by the virtues (and restraints) of writerly diligence. In particular we avoided that tendency in academic writing toward what we see as its unaccommodating insistence on a single method and focus of inquiry or expression, a proscription on straying across its borders to reckon with other ways of figuring the world. As we walked, we tried out arguments alongside our recollection of passages, of books, of figures, that were only half remembered, quoting these authors complete with misquotation and error. Our arguments were interrupted by the wind, the narrow passes, the slips, the steeper inclines and descents, by the waterlogged ground and by the "groughs" or water-eroded fissures that we crossed. This landscape does not enter into our account. It merely occasioned our thinking, even if it is not insignificant to note that the moors are ecological disaster zones, most likely artificial, early instances of ecocide, wooded until the Mesolithic and then successively deforested. Today they are maintained in their state of barrenness as occasional hunting grounds for the rich.

The book we would end up writing engages with what for us has remained an unresolved problem. Our interventions, here, and previously, have been to open up the status of the educated person to doubt and questioning. To offer an anatomy of the imperium we live under as educated people, and write under the possibility (a frail one, admittedly) that the tyranny might be shaken, its inevitable final destruction hastened (because it will end, but probably not to the immediate benefit of humanity). This necessitated a somewhat eclectic approach to reading. We read across traditions of philosophy and critique, in the arts, history, and anthropology, and any other area we came across that seemed relevant to our thinking. And as we did so, we often ended up engaging with authors who are not, it seems to us, the focus of much excitement or attention in current academic research. Some of them had their day at one time and have fallen out of what we would have to call use. Others never quite attained the kind of attention that situated their work as key areas of inquiry and argument. We have covered a field that, in our view, includes thinkers who have been variously neglected — sidelined as no longer relevant or appointed to the status of intellectual memorial statuary, admirable but no longer requiring much in the way of further examination. Against the dominant academic assumption that debate and argument must eventually achieve (or at least orient itself toward achieving) some finality, we have sought here to offer a rereading of texts that repay a return.

The authors we cite are also typically outsiders or wrote at the margins offering marginal points of view. Writing about them seemed to necessitate a less determined, less determining approach. Hence they are assembled together with their ideas in a manner that is designed to allow contradictions to remain between different perspectives and avoid adjudicating between them. We were drawn to a mode of writing and thinking which was prepared to test out and run with challenging ideas but was nonetheless open to and enticed by the gaps and contradictions which appeared. We wrote independently to some extent. Parts

I and II each had its own author, and if there is overlap between them, this reflects our exchanges, our dwelling over shared interests, figures, and texts. The short fragments we produced are not so much aphorisms — these seem to us limited by the demand for pith and wit — but experiments, tentatively ventured, tested out for their effects, and as a whole assembled in such a way as to refuse closure. This was, after all, a manner of writing that seemed to us appropriate to the style of thinking we first tested out when walking. It also seemed to us to match the nature of the problem we had already made so many aborted attempts to grasp hold of. The analysis we present is necessarily indirect, since the critique we attempt takes aim at an outlook that is somehow constitutive, and that we ourselves represent as (somewhat uncomfortable) members of a class we attempt to doubt, that of the "educated."

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