M.H. Bowker

Oblation

Essays, Parables, Paradoxes

OBLATION

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

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For Zoe and Julie

And then [*the bull*] *suddenly and quite inexplicably killed his keeper* […]. *The farmer decided that the bull must be killed* […]. *"The bull is a murderer, and he must be punished. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth* […]*," said the inexorable farmer, and the bull was duly executed by firing squad and buried* […]. *But what he had done — this act of condemning an animal to death for wrong-doing — went back into the far past of mankind, so far back we don't know where it began, but certainly it was when man hardly knew how to differentiate humans from beasts.*

— Doris Lessing, "When in the Future They Look Back on Us"

Prologue

Elements of this book defy *reason*. Do not give up hope. They do so for good reason. Much of what we do, much of what we think, is *oblation:* sacrifice, offering, to something or someone. Oblation refers to what is brought unto the altar, literally or proverbially — the profoundest oblation being the reason that binds us together, our very souls, our dearest loves, indistinguishable from ourselves, our Isaacs on our Mount Moriahs.

Consider:

The bull is a murderer […]. *An eye for an eye.* Don't you see? The Code of Hammurabi, of *Exodus* (21: 23–25), and of *Leviticus* (24: 19–21)… None is rash vengeance. The law, itself, is oblation.

The law is oblation yet remains absurd. We lose its sense with regularity.

Consider:

The natures of our oblations characterize our relationships to objects great and small, e.g., Lords and loved ones, groups and masses of signifiers. Oblative transactions promise meaning, yet we are full of questions. What is it that cries out for oblation? How do we hear its voice? Are we, in fact, called, or do we, on

the contrary, offer every bit *gratuit?* Why, as Albert Camus (1991, 12) famously remarked, do "the stage sets collapse" as we offer ourselves to life's routine?

Consider a haircut so short it reaches all the way inside the brain (and, there, to be reductive, the mind). Hair falls away and away, like dry grass in the wind. The underbelly is dug out through the scalp and laid bare for all to see. The haircutter gives us a choice: "Open thyself or stay lost in the dark."

What truth is this?
What dark is this?
Consider our choices.
We may:

1. Offer ourselves in oblation to the law, as reparation for damage, real or fantasied. This is the foundation of moral philosophy. We face a unique guilt at *not* being false selves when we refuse to observe convention, "play the game." The deities of meaning will lift up our poor spirits, but only if we comprehend the rite and make the requisite offering.
2. Live by habit in ignorance, displaced from the meaning of our oblations.
3. Hate life and all that is lively in our lives or others', for rejecting oblation makes us derelicts in the true sense of the word: completely forsaken, abandoned, left behind.
4. "Get off" on our inability to make sense of oblations satisfactorily, accentuate their impossible, chimeric quality. This is one meaning of *jouissance.* It is not asceticism. It is rooted in the suspicion that the closest we come to making meaningful offerings is denouncing them.

Selfæta

Here, we cannibalize the dead. We do not mourn; we hardly discuss it. You might say, "mouths full of meat." Once, it must have been an honorific of a sort. Now forgotten, our rituals make fools of us all. Today, what we consume is prepared in such and such a way: coverings, infusions, incomprehensible techniques, and other disguises that keep us only half-aware.

Cain carried his dead brother in a sack until he learned the ritual of burial from a raven. The similarity between the raven's murder and Cain's was enough to drive him mad, if not to deform him utterly: "The affinity runs so deep that Cain transforms, in a manner of speaking, into a raven: the blackness of his soul stains his body; his skin, which was white, becomes black" (Kilito 2016, 38).

There are those of us who long to say, "We have gone too far, for it is the dead who present their humanity to us as guests in *our* homes, in *our* bodies. Their blackness, our blackness, rends our humanity. What additional evidence is needed?" And yet it is precisely those who cannot utter it — mouths full of meat — who do not speak the language of the dead, in which all sayings are ethereal, like prayers.

But who is a sacrifice to whom? Even the Earth bore Cain's sin and mourned; stunned into sterility, as it were, by drinking Abel's blood. We sit at lavish tables.

The first poem, an elegy, is attributed by some scholars to Adam:

> The country and those who dwelt there were changed,
> The earth's surface was terrible and covered in dust.
> Everything brightly colored and delightful was altered, even the face of happiness and
> elegance was effaced.
> An enemy that never dies is stalking us,
> A cursed thing whose death and nothing else will let us breathe.
> O Abel, now that you are dead, my heart
> Suffers and bleeds for you. (Kilito 2016, 41)

According to Tabari, God responds to Adam thus: "Father of Abel, both of them were slain: The living become like the dead…" (Kilito 2016, 43).

Thus our human enterprise goes up in smoke; we do not mourn; we hardly discuss it.

The Capacity to Hate Life

"We are poor in spirit!" I might proclaim, like a drunken dunce posing as an emperor, while looking — *I,* now, not the emperor — at the cobwebs on the ceiling or the variegated shit of kids' toys on the floor, ornate like a great garden, but in a devout, humble way — the being poor in spirit; not the cobwebs or the garden of shit.

Poverty means to "produce little and receive little."[1] If we are poor, our spirits, our vital selves, are foreign to the community that transacts in, produces, and acquires things of meaning and value.[2] Yes and yes, it is a terrible poverty, but once rent (even by ourselves rent) from this community, we find that we are able to gather it up in our minds, as if it were a singular thing, which is to say, by way of our very foreignness — or its very foreignness

1 "Poverty" derives from Latin *pauper* "poor, not wealthy," from pre-Latin **pau-paros,* combining *paucus* (little) with *parare* (produce), which in turn is derived from the Proto-Indo-European root **pere-,* meaning "to produce or to procure."

2 "At the level of sublimation the object is inseparable from imaginary and especially cultural elaborations. It is not just that the collectivity recognizes in them useful objects; it finds rather a space of relaxation where it may in a way delude itself on the subject of *das Ding* [the thing], colonize the field of *das Ding* with imaginary schemes. That is how collective, socially accepted sublimations operate" (Lacan 1997, 99).

to us — we have gained the capacity to reflect upon and judge life itself.

It is true that I have just said, "*things* of meaning and value" and "singular *thing*," but the use of the terms *thing* and *things* is a necessary while unfortunate choice, not least because we must quickly employ it in the singular to explore special meanings of "thing." In "The Thing" and "What Is a Thing?," Martin Heidegger demurs on the nature of the thing and leaves it as impermeable to the intellect — "The thing things" (2013, 172) — as it was before. What he offers is a distinction between things and *objects,* as objects operate in systems of meaning and value, by which they present and represent themselves to us. (*Pace* Heidegger, even *things* are always already conditioned [*Be-dingt*].)[3]

Still, it is best to say we live in a world of *objects* and not merely a world of *things*. Here's the problem: things arise for us (*Hallo!* — but never, of course, in human speech) when we face what resides in the wild territories outside the community of object transaction in meaning and value discussed above. Although perhaps his emphasis is misleading, Bill Brown is right when he reminds us, following Heidegger, that we remark the thing-ness of objects exactly when their use is compromised, "when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily" (2011, 4). The story of objects transforming themselves into things, he adds, "is the story of a changed relationship to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject–object relation" (4).

Objects, by which I mean presences subjective and objective, both create and embody meaning and value precisely because they are part of particular subject–object relations, no matter

3 Have you heard the story of General Pétain and the tree? Lessing tells us that a certain tree was "sentenced to death" at the end of the Second World War. Since the disgraced general and all things associated with him became objects of derision, the tree was summarily "executed for collaborating with the enemy" (1987, 3).

how capricious or fantastical our attachment of meanings and value to those particular objects may be.

§

Consider, at least among the "productive classes," the rampant fear that we are producing too little, even though the pace of our work is frantic. Here is a familiar story:

> A friend who dropped in to see me a few nights ago expressed two fears in the course of the conversation. One was that, if he did not slow down, he would have a heart attack. The other was that, if he did not hurry up, he would not be able to accomplish enough that was useful before he had his heart attack. (Kerr 1962, 57)

One thinks, this poor man may well have a heart attack, for he is simply *too stressed out*. Then one recalls that the term, "stressed," was not used in this psychological sense until the 1950s and one has an unfortunate chuckle.

Then one thinks, either a renewed period of extraordinary work or a heart attack will end his poverty. There is a troubling bond, from which this man cannot free himself, between "offerings" made to society in the form of "useful" objects, and guilt at hating life. Put another way, our man wishes to have a heart attack, while he is trying desperately and simultaneously to forestall a heart attack, but *not* for the usual reasons.

Rather, the man lives in an impoverished world of objects. It is not, let me say, the fact that his objects are somehow drained of meaning or that he is melancholic or anything like that. As distasteful as it was, we talked about Heidegger to establish precisely that ground from which we may establish that this man lives in a world that tends toward thing-ness, and wishes either to transform all of his things into objects or to do no such thing and to die a martyr to civilization, which is another way to say that he is struggling and stuck between two positions: In one, he

gives himself over to the community of "useful" objects; in the other, he makes a break from life, sets his life over to one side, as it were, for a moment, perhaps even in death.

Then one thinks, this man hates his life but does not know it. Most of our hatred of life is unconscious. I trust we can all appreciate what that means. We will return to it in a moment.

Then one thinks, it would not be surprising if this man knew of — or perhaps had even lost — a relative or friend who recently had a heart attack.

Then one thinks, this idea of a heart attack has a certain meaning for this man. While the term "heart attack" was used, at the time the story was recounted, to gesture at a somewhat broader range of physical or psychological "breakdowns," this man believes his "heart" will "attack" him if he does not do enough, one might say, to satisfy its demands. The question posed by the man's dilemma, then, is where and with whom is his heart identified? What offerings does it demand? Is he making reparations for his unconscious hatred? Is he yet trying to overcome his total attachment to life? Is he merely trying to find a little joy?

Then one thinks, this man's obsession with his heart attack is a way of controlling his destiny. It is his "thing," to which he may perpetually refer. His potentiated heart attack organizes his life and offers an event horizon for him and for his seemingly onerous responsibilities. The heart attack becomes both the drive to escape poverty — to live with objects and not just things — and the final boundary against which he can measure himself and the legacy he will or won't have left behind. What he has "left behind" becomes a substitute for the content and quality of his life, of life in general.

Then one remembers, *this man hates life.* He wishes not only that his own life were over, but finds himself in what would, for most people at least, be an intolerably frustrating, terrifying, and maddening position, caught between two evils. His hatred of life may be inexpressible to him, as it arises symptomatically as an obsessive fear of not accomplishing enough that is "useful" to make adequate *reparations to life to make up for his unconscious*

hatred of it (which would be impossible in any case because his hatred, as an unconscious demand long ignored, would be *virtually infinite*).

Since our man has found his "thing" in his way, a scab at which he will keep picking, we need not know whether he will do enough that is useful to satisfy him. Nor can we speak his hatred of life *for* him, thus he remains caught in the community that denies him both a feeling of value and the capacity for free expression, excepting perhaps the expression involved in having a heart attack.

§

On this business about certain people having "things," something more must be said. There is a long tradition of thinking in this vein that reaches back further in time than most would care to investigate, but certainly at least as far as Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx. It would give me a heart attack to rehash all of that here. The idea is that we both embody and chase after our "things," not forcibly knowing they are our "things," throughout our lives, and often in highly sublimated and complex ways. Sometimes, we find a way to connect with them, although usually highly idiosyncratically and perhaps symptomatically. But, truly, we never find what we seek because what we want is something either primordially lost or wholly imaginary and thus different from anything discoverable in life. So, we chase *semblances.* This is a kind of poverty as it is a kind of depression.

I have lived and worked with the *materially* poor, people who owned little more than the baggy, layered clothes they wore, an atrocious poverty of the kind about which we seem to know enough, but care relatively little. At the same time, it is interesting that we understand "poverty" primarily, if not exclusively, in a material way. Whether we are good Marxists (at least "in spirit"!) or not, we might say that (historical) materialism is one of our "things," and we do not wish to give it up. And yet it is

capitalism and consumer culture that have narrowed the focus and meaning of "poverty" to a single dimension.

Among poverty's most pernicious effects — which include all of the above, not to mention greater rates of physical and mental illness and more — is *anomie,* alienation from the network of social institutions, what Pierre Delion (2023) calls the "socius" or simply, society. It can be difficult to conceive of poverty in this way. We are accustomed to thinking of poverty as primarily affecting bodies. But consider the definition of poverty offered by the United Nations (1998), particularly the first two sentences: "Fundamentally, poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means a lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society."[4]

Let us say, there is one thing worse than material poverty: a poverty of spirit. And it is true that these poverties can be intimately linked, yet Wallace Stevens is wrong to say that the greatest poverty is "not to live / In a physical world, to feel that one's desire / Is too difficult to tell from despair" (Stevens 1990, 325). Bodily life in a physical world is not a remedy for the confusion between desire and despair, a confusion that occurs, if you will, on a different register. Indeed, there is, in the instance of bodily desire, less of a confusion than an insatiability. There is no end. While in the imagination, desire never attains its true object, the "thing" it thinks it desires. You might find this argument to rely

4 Part of the problem, which we really learned from Marx, is that we are alienated from our labor, so even if we work industriously, we may feel we have done nothing of real value, for the sense of real value comes from having invested work and work's objects with one's particular subjectivity, one's spirit. Likewise, we may receive little on behalf of our efforts, alienating us (in yet another sense, distinct from all of Marx's) from the capitalist heroics of the day, private space travel and reality-tv presidents. Such occurrences are absurd (or mean nothing at all) to the poor person, who is *already* mystified, in some sense or other, by what others value. There is, of course, yet another problem: a pervasive fear that one will be seen or known to be poor, such that one must, of necessity, have given little, produced little, lived inadequately. Poverty, in this sense, is and has long been the Protestant anxiety *par excellence.* Here, I have said nothing new.

on a Cartesian dualism between body and spirit, but it is merely one way of speaking about a well-known problem.

It is the domain of meaning, not of physicality and organisms, where desire and despair get confused, where sources of despair are mistaken for objects of desire. For Lacan, desire "gets off" on its own inability to find satisfaction, takes pleasure in its impossible, chimeric quality. This is one meaning of *jouissance.* It is not self-frustration or asceticism. It is derived from the suspicion that the closest one comes to the object of desire is partaking in the *pleasure of renouncing it.* Without this understanding it is difficult to comprehend why virtually all major religions advocate material poverty as a means to connect to the spiritual.

In a Lacanian sense, to be poor in the body and to be "poor in spirit" are, effectively, one. The body may be differentiated from the organism: hands, legs, kidneys. There is a great difference, although not a complete one, between this organism and the body, which, through its self-image and its (immediate) introduction to signification (meaning), comes to *represent itself* in a particular way. That is to say, the body is not "basic" or "just" the body. It is so intimately caught up in signification (meaning) — what Lacan called the *symbolic* — that it is ultimately a verisimilitude, once again, a semblance.

Poverties of the body, in a non-Lacanian sense, may, in fact, be correlated with poverties of the Lacanian "body," but this is not our primary concern here, which is, on the contrary, a poverty in the area of life where signification (and hence, significance) and meaning reside: the realm of action, interaction, transaction. One can chase after the body, or bodies, or after a perfect body, or bodies, and never find one. It is also well-established that it is possible for the sex or color of one's body to exclude one, to some degree, from the signifiers of a dominant culture, but, again, this is not our primary concern here, but, rather, the concern of postcolonial, diasporic, and body studies.

§

Consider one's own life as a way to measure use and hatred: "Use" is an oblation (a sacrifice) to community life and "hatred" is damage done or imagined (fantasied) to be done. The question is how to make reparation to community life for damage real or fantasied. It is the foundation of moral philosophy.

Despite the fact that we live in an era of late capitalism, post-post-modernism, and other apparent movements toward finality, we are, it would seem, still utilitarians at heart (see Andre and Velasquez 1989). Jeremy Bentham is rightly considered the father, or grandfather (the father being John Mill; the son, John Stuart Mill), of modern utilitarianism, the theory or set of related theories organized around the principle that ethical value may be defined in reference to utility (usefulness). Although it was an idea in circulation for a century before his time, it is to Bentham that we credit the "greatest happiness principle," which understands and resolves moral contradictions in terms of the greatest happiness ("utility" is defined in terms of happiness, broadly conceived) for the greatest number. For all of its liberatory intentions, in a utilitarian world, we are one among many. In a utilitarian world, we are defined by our use-value.

There are several permutations of this basic utilitarian orientation which are not necessary to examine here. What is fascinating is the very premise of utilitarianism, what Bertrand Russell calls an idea "so fallacious that it is hard to see how [John Stuart Mill] can have thought it valid" (1996, 702). The argument boils down to this: pleasure is ultimately what is desired; therefore, pleasure is the desirable. Think of the formula invoked here: "A is known to be desired; therefore, A is all that is desirable; therefore, A is the measure of the good."

Not only does the theory move from *is* to *ought,* but it should have been destroyed by early psychoanalysts, like Freud, who were not afraid to contend that what we desire may well run (some would say, *must* run) afoul of the "good" encapsulated in norms, customs, and laws.

On this matter, consider the fact that, while not thinking psychoanalytically, J.S. Mill nevertheless worried that the utilitarian philosophy "had succeeded, though some mental gymnastic, in

excommunicating certain pleasures […]. Was it further possible that the pleasures most rigorously excluded from the system were in fact the very highest pleasures?" (Kerr 1962, 46). If so, desire never reaches its sublime (exceedingly sublimated) object, only comes near it, then ravages it for not being what was really desired (for which the super-sublimated object was a replacement), and starts desiring again.

§

Perhaps the real question is whether the reparations one has offered to life are manic or genuine, insufficient or adequate, to break free from guilt.[5] Melanie Klein insisted that "true reparation, unlike manic reparation, was not a reaction to guilt but an overcoming of guilt" (Alvarez 2000, 19). The truth is that, in health, some guilt may always present itself, but an excess of guilt indicates that the individual is "stuck," because they cannot make genuine reparations to life. The force of hatred is simply too strong.

"We are pushed," Walter Kerr observes (1962, 39), "but while being pushed does breed in us a habit of walking faster, […] if we were wholly sane […], we should resent being pushed, rebel against being pushed […]. If we were granted a holiday […], we should feel entitled to it, grateful for it — not guilty about it." For what transgression might we feel guilty? For hating life precisely when we are supposed to love it? Built into holidays, for instance, is a contradiction at the heart of ourselves and society. The law that "only useful activity is valuable, meaningful, moral" and "activity that is not clearly, concretely useful to oneself or to others is worthless, meaningless, immoral" (40) contradicts the

5 Mania is a state of being in which general excitation is increased, sometimes alongside feelings of invulnerability or elation, as well as anxiety and racing thoughts. It can feel like being pushed by some external force to go faster, faster, to make and take more, more. In manic behavior (staying up for days, spending thousands of dollars, painting all the walls red, etc.), we often see the roots of depression return in the symptom which has developed (via defense) into its opposite.

very spirit of respite and holiday. This is one reason why holidays may heighten our experience of stuckness.

The hatred of life may also be understood as a refusal of that which holds society together. For Freud, we share in guilt when we destroy ways of living under oppression (lives we hated) for the promise of a way of living that we would not hate, that seemed even to provide occasional semblances of the original omnipotence of the primal father. We did not expect abject poverty of spirit.

R.D. Laing argues that we face a unique form of "guilt at being a false self" when we refuse to "play the game," the great social collusion of meaning and value (1969, 90–106). In this case, that the community of meaning and value will lift up our poor spirits if only we do enough to satisfy its demands. We can only accomplish this "offering" if we come to love this community. Thus, the connection between the refusal of guilt and the hatred of life helps make explicit the links between guilt and the loving attitude we are supposed to take up toward life (which may be correlated with D.W. Winnicott's "false self").

Let me introduce a corollary distinction on the side of the psyche. "Manic reparation" is a Kleinian term for a complex defense against the ambivalence and dependence associated with the depressive position, in which love, guilt, and reparation dominate the psyche as the individual has recognized the caregiver as a complex and separate entity (and has simultaneously introjected internal objects to match) out of fear that their hatred (past, present, and future) will destroy the object's (and the internal object's) goodness.[6] In "mock" or "manic" reparation, we seem to perceive a movement toward genuine reparation but, instead, find that (1) the object has not been truly separated from the self, or, instead, the self controls it, omnipotently, as it were, in fantasy. Thus, any imagined reconciliation with the

6 Most psychoanalysts who think about "objects" immediately think of the primary caregiver or "mother" figure who is loved and hated but, in manic or mock reparation, whose interactions with the child, and particularly, the child's fantasied attacks on the mother, are never adequately worked through.

object is accomplished through phantasy, denial, or perhaps a kind of manic exultation; (2) the object cannot be experienced as damaged by the self, such that guilt and loss cannot be felt; and (3) the object must be held to a great degree in contempt, as the prospect of restoring a whole good object, or even an ambivalent one, would be too frightening.

§

Think of Franz Kafka's "Hunger Artist," who, upon his profoundly impoverished deathbed, confesses that although he always wanted to be admired for his fasting, the truth is that he just couldn't help it, for he never found "the food he liked" (Kafka 1971, 277). To detest food may have a couple of meanings. Let us say either (1) he simply detests all food for some odd biological reason, yet still eats occasionally out of necessity; or (2) he detests the idea or object of food for psychological reasons, reasons which might lead him to become a "hunger artist" who abstains from food in exchange for praise and or glory.

The eponymous performer starves himself for a living. But he comes to be dissatisfied with his performances, as they are but mock reparations for his hatred of life, just as his audiences lose interest in "the art of fasting." But the artist is unhappy for reasons more complex than the public's. The artist is dissatisfied because he does not wish to hear the truth about himself, a truth that only he can hear: that his art is no art for him, although he wishes that it were.

The artist's hatred is expressed in his anger and frustration projected upon his manager for setting limits to the duration of his fasts, not out of concern for the artist's health but because "after [about forty days] the town began to lose interest" (Kafka 1971, 271). It further annoys the artist that auditors of sorts are assigned to verify that he is not eating at night, for the artist "would never in any circumstances, not even under forcible compulsion, swallow the smallest morsel of food; the honor of his profession forbade it" (268–69). Even worse are advertisements such as "photographs […] showing the artist on the forti-

eth day of a fast lying in bed almost dead from exhaustion […]. What was a consequence of the premature ending of his fast was here presented as the cause of it! To fight against this lack of understanding, against a whole world of nonunderstanding, was impossible" (272–73).

In the end, the artist's performances cease to attract audiences, and he is hired by a circus and stationed at the periphery, along an entrance route to the main attraction, a mere *amuse-bouche* to the eventual *entrée*. Neglected, his exhibition falls into disuse, the placard describing his performance becomes illegible, and the notice board counting the days of his fast is untouched for weeks or months. So, the artist fasts amidst indifference and uncertainty. Even he loses track of the duration of his final fast, and although he is sure he's broken every record, he has no proof and no reward. He begins to die.

One day, the circus overseer and attendants pass by what they take to be an empty cage, for the hunger artist is so camouflaged by carelessness, as it were, that he barely *is* — which, it should be recalled, may well be the artist's true aim. They poke around the cage with a stick, find the artist, and ask, "Are you still fasting?" and "When on earth do you mean to stop?" To this the hunger artist asks for forgiveness and explains, "I always wanted you to admire my fasting […] [b]ut you shouldn't admire it." When asked why they shouldn't, the artist explains, "Because I have to fast, I can't help it." "Why can't you help it?" they wonder, bemused. And the artist whispers, "Because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else" (276–77).

In addition to what we have said above, we may now suggest that the artist was never able to find the food he liked because he was never able to hear the call of his own hunger, his own desire to live and thrive, and instead, only the desire to be a center of attention for others, to nourish them by refusing to nourish himself, and so, to (ful)fill himself only by proxy.

What the hunger artist finally admits is that he does not fast at all, that his art is a charade, that he is nothing special, just a man who eats or does not eat according to his preference, like

everybody else. That he "feeds" on attention rather than on food destroys the possibility of interest in his performances, presented as exercises in superhuman self-control, but, in fact, displays of, shall we say, a loss of appetite for living.

Perhaps modern audiences are on to him. More likely, modern audiences are, themselves, so near to losing their own appetites that they do not wish to see their fears enacted before them on a stage. Perhaps they recognize that life can boil down to this: food or starvation. It is a detestable possibility. Perhaps they'd rather avoid the thought of it altogether, finding distraction in something, anything else, even that which is uninteresting, so long as it is *lively,* such as the panther that takes over the artist's cage.

The panther eats huge chunks of meat with a "joy of life" that "streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it. But they braced themselves, crowded around the cage, and did not ever want to move away" (277).

§

Who does not hold in reserve, somewhere, a special attitude toward life, lest we feel utterly helpless in our deaths? Ramon Guthrie (1970, 4) writes:

> I'd like to give one last galvanic jerk
> and flip up straight and look all living beings
> in the eye…
> and speak out clear: "I hate life. I who am
> no longer living can speak this truth.
> From my first taste of it…
> I have always hated living!"
> then flop back into the casket with a happy
> or, at least, contented or vacuous, smirk upon my face —
> soundly dead for keeps this time.

It seems important that Guthrie proclaims himself no longer to be living. To stand outside of life is a freedom, if it is possible. If it is impossible, we are so caught up with life we have trouble with hate because we always end up hating something we love, especially a part of ourselves.

But is there not some schizoid operation or splitting involved here? Could it be a merely imaginative (e.g., "healthy") one? Does it lead us to Albert Camus's (bating) question about the philosophical necessity of suicide? It seems, in its own way, an easy way out. If life is detestable then death is not lamentable.

On the other hand, what an exultation to be able to hate life while living it, which Guthrie has done, and in which we, living readers, partake!

He has made the unconscious conscious! He has spoken the secret words of hate! What a jolt of vitality, what a jolt of life, itself!

Again, Guthrie "hates" his life, and this is his experience of it, and yet there is a certain jubilation (is there not?) in his reply to an admirer:

> […] Even as I set to speak,
> you gasp, "How fascinating it must be to live
> in that mind of yours where everything
> is glistening new and subtle and alive!
> I often wonder what it must be like."
> Hold tight! I am about to tell you. Mostly
> it is like being a nightwatchman in a morgue
> where it is always night and all of the cadavers
> suffer from perpetual insomnia
> even in their most excruciating nightmares
> while he himself lives in continual sick dread
> of being fired. (1968, 31)

Life is a series of unending nightmares, populated with the sleeping dead. It is a life that no one else seems to comprehend, mistaking it, as Guthrie's interlocutor does, for Paradise. Guthrie, the nightwatchman, lives in terrible fear of being fired, for the

telling of this nightly *dance macabre* is his only connection to Paradise. To be fired would be the end of everything.

§

We can imagine an ancient tribe whose members hated life as a religion (we need only Judeo-Christianity for that, if we believe Friedrich Nietzsche), like

> those savages of whom it is recounted that they have no other longing than to die, or, rather, they no longer have even that longing, but death has a longing for them, and they abandon themselves to it, or rather, they do not even abandon themselves, but fall into the same on the shore and never get up again — those savages I much resemble. (Kafka 1975, 121)

At the same time, in the new territories, "anyone who might collapse without cause and remain lying on the ground is dreaded as though he were the Devil, it is because of the example, it is because of the stench of truth that would emanate from him" (121).

§

Assuming we can gather it up and see it as an object somewhere in our minds, even in the unconscious, why, you might ask, might we hate life instead of loving it? Apart from the obvious prejudicial responses (*Because life is detestable!*), hating life is as close as we come to a kind of exultation denied to most in life. If we were indeed "fashioned to live in Paradise," but "our destiny has been altered" (Kafka 1975, 29), our small reward is that we may gain the capacity to speak this truth, which, again, is more than most can say, and this speaking act reconnects us to ourselves, which, paradoxically, although only momentarily, is superior to our lasting poverty.[7]

7 Hating life is, ultimately, a crucial and even beloved part of life for some. Kafka asks: "Why do we lament over the fall of man? We were not driven

In the capacity to hate life we find an ability to break free from beloved objects, a deferment or resolution of guilt at the possibility of hurting them, a freedom and a permission to express hateful feelings of the broadest and most intense nature. Using our imaginations, of course, we stand outside of life, without idealizing poverty, and make a terrible announcement.

Again, it is fair to ask why we might not achieve the same result from gathering up life, looking at it, and *loving* it? The question is too complex to answer, but the capacities for loving and for hating life are, obviously, distinct although not unrelated.[8] What is most important is that they express vastly different relations to persons and objects. It is demanded that we love life in certain ways, while living it, owing to forces well beyond our own power (see McGowan 2004). Think of consumerism, the world of images, and conspicuous consumption. These depend on what Herbert Marcuse called the necessary "Happy Consciousness" of those for whom "the real is rational and […] the system delivers the goods" (1964, 84).[9]

This is how life works, through acculturation and integration, making it unlovable: "Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes part of the ceremony" (Kafka 1975, 93). Hating life demands that one leave the temple and its past alto-

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out of Paradise because of it" (1975, 29). We lament it because, in the fallen state, the closest we can come to Paradise is the state of hating life. I am not talking about manic grandiosity.

8 Even Albert Camus, the absurd Romantic, recognized the uniqueness of hatred, e.g., "as only hatred can weld two creatures together" (1991, 21).

9 Kierkegaard writes: "You are only within yourself when there is opposition, but therefore you are never within yourself. That is to say, the moment you assimilate opposition there is quiet again. Therefore you do not dare to do so. But then you and the opposition remain standing face to face, and so you are not within yourself… You are outside yourself and therefore cannot dispense with 'the other' as an opposition; you believe only that a restless spirit is alive, whereas all men of experience think that only a quiet spirit is truly alive; for you, an agitated sea is the image of life" (1843, 93).

gether, including the parts of oneself identified with it, and with those things in it that have been declared to hold meaning and value, its habits and gestures, its seemingly ancient and seemingly meaningful rituals and sacrifices.

Beyond this point it is impossible to go, except perhaps to return to Guthrie:

> I *tried* to love life —
> tried my damndest but just couldn't make it.
> Matter of acquired tastes you somehow can't acquire —
> (1970, 5)

§

Depression is poverty and poverty is related to the fear that one holds no value outside of what one produces. How much one produces and how much one receives from this production is, of course, a poor substitute for work and satisfaction or, more generally, feeling connected to oneself in one's activities, which hold meaning and value both internally (to oneself) and in the world. One is thrown back on the original question of the value of the self beyond one's place in the community of transaction, production, and acquisition.

If one were a Lacanian, one would say that Guthrie has enjoyed, and perhaps shared, a moment of *jouissance*. But between rare moments of *jouissance,* we are poor in spirit, for a part of us has never accepted our guilt about hating life, wanting to destroy it, wishing we and others were dead, or had never been born. This is the wisdom of Silenus, of which Nietzsche reminds us: "What would be best for you is quite beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be,* to be *nothing.* But the second best is to die soon" (Nietzsche 1956, 29, emphasis in original).

Silenus, in fact, is at the root of all we have been discussing. Well beyond pessimism or misanthropy, the hatred of life is half of the Camusian project — although it is covered over by grandiose and defensive idealizations of life throughout his

work. See the passage in *The Myth of Sisyphus* about overcoming the hatred of life via "scorn" — the other half being nonsense (Bowker 2014).

Those who hate life must be able to articulate their hatred, or else must be able to withstand a broad attack on all objects, even the good. That is, the individual must contend with the reality and consequences of the radical split from life involved in its hatred, which is like a kind of holistic loss. How can one attain this capacity? What ground must one have on which to stand?

Only the person who has "overcome guilt" and believes he has made successful reparation to life and to internal objects is capable of hating life. Hating life, which is a kind of privilege, is possible because the object is distinguishable from the self and from good objects, so the self need not feel excessive responsibility, guilt, or fear. If we are poor in spirit because we do not or cannot accept our guilt, it means, in part, that we do not or cannot accept the damage we have done to the object, to life. We cannot declare, while living in this state, that we "hate" life. Or, rather, we can, but only manically and omnipotently, as a defense against the agony of guilt.

A Parable of Mothers

Mother keeps insisting she will lose weight by eating indescribable, tiny clumps of magnetic black and grey metal — the sum of which gives the impression of a piece of wet flint.

The reasoning behind her consumption of these obviously indigestible clumps is that her metabolism is boosted with foods made up of "miniscule particles of DNA," little, stunted chains and branches, "like bonsai trees."

She is not well *in mente,* hunched over, in her bedclothes.

I cannot believe she is being so foolish.

I am embarrassed and utterly lost at the same time.

Later, on our "date night" — initially, I forget all about the DNA-chains — first in the parking lot — then at some gathering which requires us to stay in our car — I go to the grocery store for food — remembering again that I must choose it carefully, to resemble a shard of coal.

When I return, I see that another mother has taken my place in the car.

At my pathetic offering and my soiled hands — at the *residue,* if you will, of all my efforts to feed her with that which does not nourish — the mothers laugh and laugh.

Munchausen, or, Romanced with Ruin Waiting in the Dawn

When it comes to Munchausen, it may not be but is to seem that nothing is true. Noble lies are plagiarized, kidnapped by vulgar blood, as manic flights erupt, chthonic puffs, against the death of everyday enchantment. Former ties are estranged to familiar Houses, strained of perversion, returned from *territoires bizarres,* roaring, driven, flying, terrorizing, *ūtland* noises, riven by outlandishment.

§

It was when she said, "There is no such thing as the truth," that the *Grosse Böse Wolf* ran out of his den, and we knew, or should have known.

It was when Hieronymus Karl Friedrich, Freiherr von Münchhausen said, "I entered the mouth of the *Grosse Böse Wolf,* and pulled, turning him inside-out, like a glove," that we knew, or should have known.

It was when the thirteenth-century *Münch*, emancipated from his vows to preserve his House, gave up monastic life and, in no time, declaimed, *Mine Borg is God! (My House is my*

Castle!), that "the tree, at night, began to change, // Smoking through green and smoking blue" (Stevens 1990, 203).

We found a glorious delirium behind shades of fog, treeline *soirée,* candelabras burning between the forest and the battlefield. We sat at liquored tables as explosions rang our ears until we laughed, like cries, at fables told of Russians killing Turks, unreal travails, routings, troops debouching, all you might imagine.

Beyond the reverie, the silent, pierced haze and silvered dew of dawn awakened wordless animals to their familiar broods.

§

Everything is contamination in Shakespeare. Contamination, pollution. In Shakespeare, as in Sophocles. Contaminated heart, mind, blood, hand. Contaminated House.

Everything is contamination in Shakespeare as in Freud, both of whom interpolated what was already known: the ego, hero of the House, falls and falls in pitfalls of dust and ashes, striving to escape itself, pollution of dust and ashes at the true heart's core.

Contamination is defilement and touching, to ruin and *tangere,* to touch and to be felt, handled, manipulated, to be returned to the world and its idiosyncratic paramours, to hold and to be held and with the same touch, to be pricked, punctured by the intercourse of flesh on flesh.

We know what happens when you kill a father and take a mother's hand in marriage, and so corrupt the land.

But what to touch an infant's mouth, to suffocate them surreptitiously, and so pollute the air?

To obtain for them a tracheotomy, and so contaminate the breath?

To feed the child *Ipecac?*

To contaminate their feeding tube with feces?

All of this is: "Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy."

The land and breath and air spoke fearfully about these extraordinary ones, lavish corrupters, — *Why is it always the*

mothers? — but never cried out — *Bloody Murder!* — but never cried out what they longed to hear, be those beleaguered syllables what they may.

The Baron heard what he wished, from the angels, or the blue sky, or God himself, or said he did: "You will be rewarded for this, my son, in time."

To hear it released him from the inadequacies of the planet, its languorous carriage, its traitorous banality, with an exonerating lift, like "riding cannonballs" throughout the night (Münchhausen 1960, 70), speeding beyond the depressed surface of the Earth, ordaining his divine *déstin*.

§

Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy is Munchausen's Syndrome and Munchausen's Syndrome is Baron Munchausen and Baron Munchausen is Freiherr von Münchhausen, *mutatis mutandis.*

The mother sees the child and knows something is wrong, knows there is something wrong with the child.

Something is wrong with the child and nothing is wrong with the child but something is wrong with the idea of the child, the child alive in a florid world, alive with the vibrant sincerity of play, or, let us say, with the eruptive scenery of it all.

Essai: Munchausens love too much, but the wrong thing, rather the idea and not the thing, object of real ruthlessness, redemption for the loss of pure potentiality, an ideal of experience, a true exquisite tale, not a vulgar story of seduction, not a child and his boisterous world but a perfect *pietà*.

It is not a question of the truth, for the lie tells it, yet the truth of the lie is also an addiction, a compulsion that steals the blood below the conscious plane. The child feeds the demon, as it were, with its child's body, by being a body, a body on which to transpose, with the only psychic surgery that matters, wild deprivations. But, take note, the child feeds not himself, for he

is not, himself, alive, rather a contaminated limb, limb of a dying tree, tree of a dark wood, wood beside the *Borg* of God.

§

Angelita von Münchhausen, the latest of her House, writes that the tales of the Baron, a satyr of sorts, were satires of sorts, in eighteenth-century German courts, *salons* of sorts. The Baron poisoned guests, wise or young, with strange satire (PIE root **sa,* "to satisfy"), leaving them to guzzle each diminutive adventure, muttering.

One may say the outrage (*ce qui est là où*) of his tales was laid hastily upon his listeners with a touch *peu subtile,* subjecting tales, themselves, genres *entiers,* to harsh light, for who could follow him?

Never enjoying "more than *a sickly and uncertain existence* […] the satirist is popularly regarded as a sour-spirited knave" (Bierce 1911, emphasis added), "lutanist of fleas […] the thane, / The ribboned stick, the bellowing breeches […] haw / Of hum, inquisitorial botanist" and yet his eyes, *so blau,* like purest sky, "and general lexicographer" (Stevens 1990, 28), his lies, *so linden.*

§

The Baron is depicted with the enormous nose of the German-fabled Jew.

His prevailing nose proves the lies of the Jew, the libel that kills and consummates the King, *REX IVDÆORVM,* of the Castle.

Yet to lie (*mentir,* to say what is exotic to reality) is also to teach (*mentōr,* advisor of things to come), in parabolic parable, to teach the lie that is the truth, the truth of touching that touches truth *in extremis,* in the extremities, in the finger, toe, mouth, penis, breast, rib, at the touching point, the touching point of self and Earth, the point comprising life itself.

What shall we call the point of life touching lie, always escaping our eyes, honest shadow, beneath the light of the sun, part Earth and part evening?

§

If telling adventures of near death is not a defense against a *different* death — which is to say a manic flight from *Letztermenschlichkeit* — it is possible that tales, stories, histories, histrionics, hysterias are expressions, irreducible, of the teller's unconscious.

This would be the *sinthome,* chez Lacan, the person, artificially made, who becomes her own *symptôme (sinthome),* unraveling unconscious consanguineous thews, *parmi les autres* (among significant others).

It is not mere pleasure-seeking but pursuit of *jouissance* that drives the sleigh through impassable, impossible winter. Unconscious dread drives and drives the harnessed wolf, but never cries for help.

The Baron revels in majestic conquest. Ordinariness and loss take shelter in us, for we envy the angels with whom he spoke. They hear but the silence of snow, not the voice of the persecutory object, whispering contamination — dust and ashes — saying what vulgar persons we've become, what the ground of nothing is, what we shall always be.

§

> Notwithstanding my large clinical experience… I found myself in a state of disbelief and shock when I was asked to prepare a psychiatric court report on Mrs. H.
>
> Such was the horror of Mrs. H's actions that left me astounded, confused, and unable to think.
>
> Mrs. H was suspected of pulling and removing, from birth, her two babies' finger- and toenails…

> The removal of her children's toe- and fingernails, appeared to be a cold planned revenge, showing a strong sadistic quality…
>
> There were no precedents of this kind of behavior except in acts of torture…
>
> When I began to regain my capacity for thought, I speculated that taking away growing and protective structures, (such as nails) leaving fragile, raw skin exposed to continuous physical harm, might indicate the way she experienced herself; as a raw object, exposed to so much suffering that she had to rigidly protect herself with detachment and strangeness to avoid experiencing her own unbearable pain. (Welldon 2001, 49–50)

§

Abusing others' angelic modicums, Munchausens are perverse, their exaggerations verbalizations of inarticulable fantasies of perfection.

You see, even psychology is factitious. It is not as if there were no facts. Factitious is that the patient wishes to transform herself into the object of psychology, the "person, artificially made," who finds a compromise between pristine heights and dusty reality. It is not that she does not wish to transform herself. But, as she wishes: in a way orthogonal to the couch.

What she drives after, even in dread, is the experience of ecstasy, of immaculate suffering. Where is her House and Castle? Above a semi-comprehending world, beneath a high commandment not to be understood, and a private hell, whose tableau is indistinguishable from heaven's.

§

Terry Gilliam's monstrous Munchausen film transforms the Baron, sensational enough, into a deluded mountebank, a

cheery Don Quixote, a bearded Peter Pan, his outrageous tales propped up against Enlightenment, Modernity, Science.

But it is not Enlightenment that is bent, rather penitent repetition of original sin. The badness of the first House, of every House to come, the badness of the child — a reminder of a particular punishment — the badness of the one who *takes in* what is indigestible, who comprises ends and opposites of every parent's wish.

Yet who is it — the child or the heroine — who fails to distinguish the serpentine temptation to live in ruinous glory from the need to be fulfilled?

To pollute the innocent would seem a manner of confession.

§

Munchausen's ribald mendacity is narcissistic in the clinical sense of making marvelous what is pressingly absent, grotesquery cleaned up to fashion selves spectacular vis-à-vis *les autres.* See the charming braggart who floods the "breaks and dams" of every other's thoughts such that none can exempt himself from partaking.

But are the tales told in jest? And what precisely are their object? What is the body of a child, swathed in pathos? The meager other, whose corpus is but this or that intelligence? The story, itself, hanging around the memories of those who have seen blood? The blood itself, lustrous rust? And what is jest but a means of flooding to contamination someone or something, who might otherwise say as one *voix intérieure,* "You cannot compare; just close your fiery eyes and sleep"?

§

Groups elect their sickest members as leaders. To lead them toward sickness *in mente* and so approach the ego's ideal, which is to banish the ego, itself, to fall into sharp schizophrenia, to copulate and ravage in blood, to live in blood, by blood to conquer any inhibition.

Bodies politic anoint heroes nearly ruined by temerity, extraordinary enthusiasm for the bible of the nation. Lesser-known is the relation of the hero or the heroine to the ever-sick and -suffering one: Diogenes in Alexander's shadow, priestess to unapologetic penitent, humanity to cynical mass, sickness to a nation of the sick, orator to the abhorring.

§

Once, the Baron told of traveling in snow so thick and deep he trod above the Earth, even unto the skies; even unto the skies, even unto the point at which his horse could be hitched to the highest steeple of the greatest church.

The Baron is always above the steep whereas everyone else is in deep. *Haha!*

§

Every morn and every night, we take fistfuls of pills.

Perhaps the pills perform perverse rituals in our minds, making the real unreal, the unreal real. What else could they do?

Perhaps the pills tell stories we most long to hear. What else could they do?

Perhaps the pills, perhaps those who are pills, who *are* tonics, who invigorate to live, perhaps they, too, cannot help but lie, speaking a true demand: "Look at me now." What else could they do?

Every night and every morn, the histrionic mother gives the feeble daughter large white pills to be dissolved beneath her tongue. The pills give the child migraines, pain known too well to see the truth, to feel what is real, to conceive the inconceivable.

§

To lie is to tell a secret to oneself amidst explosions of bother, whose abundant clattering in the front of the mind covers up a nearly imperceptible gasp and swallow.

§

The medicalization of society is a matter of fact. Duping doctors is delight.

In another era, the Munchausen would have appealed not to the Doctor but to the Priest.

She would have presented herself in shredded gowns, a sinner unredeemable, mortified, excoriated, the endless object of her own prayer, and prayers beneath prayers that ask the angels to remember: not holy redemption.

Such a woman would be beatified, her assurances of Earthly agony and sin ratified by her daily routine.

Should she have borne children, they, too, would have been contaminated by that most approachable mark, scar of innocent desire, the first fighting breath.

§

Those who tell Munchausen tales are those who wish the world to end.

The world to end but to remain alive until the last.

To be the last.

Not even to remain until the last but to ascend.

Not precisely to ascend but, at least, amidst the ruins, to fly above the ruins, to the moon, glorious estate, and to be greeted there, warmly, by its most gracious magistrates.

§

> There were many case reports of Munchausen's syndrome published after Asher's original paper. These were almost all descriptive reports, and only the most extreme or entertaining narratives would probably be published. Rather than add

> anything substantial to medical knowledge, these anecdotes usually had more in common with the Baron's original tales. This fact is perhaps exemplified by persistent use of ornate typology—laparotamophilia migrans (abdominal type), haemorrhagica histrionica (haemorrhagical type), and neurologica diabolica (neurological type)—used to classify cases, which has little purpose other than to entertain. (Turner and Reid 2022, 347–48)

§

Lack comprises lies that seek investiture, a special kind of confirmation (presumably denied at teetering points, present and past). Nevertheless, shame keeps whispering, *There is something wrong*.

"I am sick" may be a real complaint. "My child is sick," too, but is more complex for Munchausens, meaning: "The child is making me sick." "Make the child sick, and, in that moment, when his skin is torn and hushed worries are squelched and all that looms of concern in a white room is staying alive, both of us will be healed."

§

> "How do you act when you're sick, Julie? Show me." I slough on the edge of the table, limbs dangling. I hang my tongue out and my bottom lip falls away from my teeth [..].
>
> "That's right. Now what do you think the doctor is going to say if he comes in here and you're sitting up and all smiling? Do you think he's going to believe me that you're sick?
>
> You got to show him how sick you are outside the doctor's office. We got to get to the bottom of this thing so Mommy can get some rest […]"
>
> "Okay, honey?"
>
> "Ok, Mommy."

> "I'm sorry, Doctor, I don't know what's wrong with her that she's doing this to me." (Gregory 2003, 23)

§

Parents sicken their children — disastrous teachings, heads wrenched toward home, Plato's captives in their cave, ever and always, even far away from home's delusions, trained to make a smile in the other's face, to be what they are not, to self-immolate in the Himalayas of mother's dreams and father's wishes, fears and nightmares — all the time.

§

Nota Bene: Munchausen symptoms are regularly metaphors of war: deception, avoiding detection, defeating the ruthless, describing to good authorities what casualties have been suffered, and what valorous individual — incredible as he may seem to the trauma doctors and the medics, to the captains and the generals — carried the day.

§

The lies hold within *another* truth, a law for story-tellers now and then, a truth that humbles others, which reminds us not only that the here-or-there Munchausen is adept at moving and unmoving people as she wishes, but that something is, indeed, terribly wrong with every other tale of struggle and conquest, ravage and destruction of *ennemis étourdis.*

§

Perhaps inadequate respect is given simply for enduring the trauma and dread of life, itself; convulsion and communion, the sole remaining consolations.

Medical doctors will affirm a leg has been cut off, or a foot amputated from frostbite. *Peu importe.*

Munchausens seek medical treatments when what is needed are psychological events, evanescent and illusory as they may be: the moment in the dream of falling when one gives in, to be touched by a heavenly hand and so to fly, to be reassured that every terror is accounted, that none shall be forgotten.

At the same time, Munchausens secretly long to be despised for bending the world to their wills throughout torrential days and torrential nights where none can say, "…regardless of the consequence…."

§

Sed quaeritur: Why a child, why the child within, must be injured, by the lies, in the end? Is it not even or just because all will fight like children — wielding *n'importe quoi* in wild defense, even or just, to save and savor alone the needed post of prominence before an intuition of grey crowds and a faceless populace — to the last drop of blood?

The Tower of Babel

Fourteenth-century Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun writes:

> At the time of our lord Abraham, Nimrod and his people were struck down from their tower, the famous *balbala* […]. I do not know its meaning. To say one day that all men spoke the same language and the next all spoke different languages seems to me improbable, based on ordinary experience (*al-'ada*). But perhaps this was a case of prophetic action, which would mean that it was a miracle. This is not how the story has been related, however. It would seem that what happened was an extraordinary act of divine will, that it was one of God's signs, like the Holy Quran. One can say no more that is reasonable on the subject of *balbala*. (1986, 156–57)

But how can we not discuss that most hateful story, the tale of the Tower of Babel, of *balbala,* of Nimrod and the land of Shinar, of the city and tower that offended God, of the tower that — according to later books and various commentaries — after the great dispersal of humanity, was left to burn, to be scattered by the winds, or to be swallowed up by the earth?

There are but three known parables by Franz Kafka concerning the Tower of Babel, and one that links the building of the Tower to the construction of the Great Wall of China, which

story and topic of investigation, of course, is linked inextricably to the Emperor, as is the Emperor to his subjects, his subjects to the Law, the Law to Prohibition, Prohibition to Father-Figures, and so forth, until you are left with an impossible number of Kafkas, more than you had ever wanted. In fact, we will deal with all these impossible Kafkas in this essay alone, but of course there are always more. In sum, a limit imposes itself. It is of necessity an arbitrary limit, and the limit in this case will be to the most direct writing about the Tower along with the most direct writing about the Wall to the exclusion of all but a few parables and fragments.

The Tower of Babel in the Book of Genesis is the primary topic under discussion:

> And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another: "Come, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said: "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower, with its top in heaven, and let us make us a name; lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the LORD said: "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is what they begin to do; and now nothing will be withholden from them, which they purpose to do. Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth; and they left off to build the city. Therefore was the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth; and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth. (Gen. 11:1–9, KJV)

It is clear that the dream of the builders is not to conquer the Lord. It is not to conquer *Him.* It is also clear that the story is not the story of Icarus flying too close to the sun. It is to work together to build something binding, something that will unite all the people of the world. The city of Babel is as important, or more important, than the tower, just as, while the tower is to reach heaven, it may be only incidental that a great tower should reach these people's conception of heaven's height. Is Kafka wrong to suggest that "the essential thing in the whole business is the idea of building a tower that will reach to heaven" (1975, 37)? What if "with its top in heaven" were just a figure of speech?

In any case, what is there to fear? It is of great importance that God *did not* destroy the Tower or the city directly. He was naïve enough to believe that great confusion and the division of humankind would be enough to prevent the consolidation of earthly power. I imagine a people of Babel who presaged the Lord's eventual punishment, which would arrive at any moment, for His capricious destructiveness was already well-known, and wished to construct the city and the Tower as *defenses against God.*

Is it not said that after the great flood, the people shall multiply over the face of the Earth? Is God's "scattering" a means to disassemble a budding empire? Is it meant to be a lesson? Many think so. One interpretation of the lesson is, "Do not think that you can do it alone." But, of course, there would be no sense to this lesson, as God was forced to undercut their entire enterprise precisely because they seemed perfectly capable of doing it alone; indeed this is God's precise fear. Another lesson, partly the same, might be, "Do not think that you can compare to Me." In this lesson, similar to the common reading (although not the best reading) of the Book of Job, the point is to realize that no one must attempt to compete with God's greatness.

But if God is in fact the greatest object in every conceivable universe, then what is the sense of this prohibition? Why not allow the people to attempt to compete with God, and fail? That is how a father acts. He allows the child to try something, virtu-

ally anything, as he makes failure acceptable, not by precluding and prohibiting attempts at either potentially successful or inevitably doomed endeavors.

§

The primary goal of the people is to create a great community, capacious enough to hold together a collective if not a proud group identity. It is suggested that the ability to succeed in this work is connected to the creation of "a name" for the city, which is to say, a great name built upon power. What might this name be? Might God have feared it would have been his very own, *Adonai,* אֲדֹנָי, the name of God, Himself?

All rabbinic texts and commentaries are clear. The sense and intention of "a name" is really "making a great name for oneself," which requires the assertion of power as much as it requires the exercise of power. But upon whom would the great city exercise its power, if all were united under a common banner, as it were? If anything, by making people foreign to each other, God has created a situation where empires, war, and atrocity against one's neighbors become probable and, as we have seen, since the beginning of humanity, unending.

It cannot be known if the Lord misunderstands the purpose of the people, or attributes to them a purpose that may or may not be their own. In either case, God's understanding of the purpose of the people is to create a place where one can *do anything,* where *nothing is forbidden.*

Of course, God's prohibits such an outcome by destroying the people's means of communication, understanding, and shared purpose. Although it is presented as a literal dissemination of a literal populace, it is moreover, we might say with Abdelfattah Kilito, "a symbolic demolition, the end of mankind's hopes and dreams" (2016, 16).

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Let me suggest: A multitude of humanity that *understands* each other, shares a common purpose, and carries a noteworthy "name" to unite them, is an imagination of Paradise. The terrible consequence of Babel, in the eyes of the Lord, is the recreation of Paradise, a place in which "nothing will be withholden from [the people]."

The reason why a unified city, all speaking one tongue and having gained a degree of earthly power, may attain such a state of affairs is because they would *fall in love with life* and cease to sacrifice their lives to death and deathliness. Consider Kafka's short story, "The Great Wall of China," in which the builders — as we might imagine for the builders of the Tower of Babel — although they must endure incredible hardships, love the Wall, and put their whole selves into it (1971, 236–37):

> The wall was to be a protection for centuries; accordingly, the most scrupulous care in the building, the application of the architectural wisdom of all known ages and peoples, an unremitting sense of personal responsibility in the builders were indispensable prerequisites for the work. […]
>
> Like eternally hopeful children [the builders] then said farewell to their homes; the desire once more to labor on the wall of the nation became irresistible. They set off earlier than needed; half the village accompanied them for long distances. Groups of people with banners and streamers waving were on all the roads; never before had they seen how great and rich and beautiful and worthy of love their country was. Every fellow countryman was a brother for whom one was building a wall of protection, and who would return life-long thanks for it with all he had and did. Unity! Unity! Shoulder to shoulder, a ring of brothers, a current of blood no longer confined within the narrow circulation of one body, but sweetly rolling and yet ever returning throughout the endless leagues of China. (236–38)

The Wall becomes a metaphor for Paradise created by its very construction, a unity of human effort.

And this unity of human effort takes the form of a kind of love, a love for the community and a love for the project. What must be done is to elaborate this connection between loving attachment to a human project and God's punishment. The severity of the punishment is clear: It is a Paradise lost. As Kilito points out (2016, 15), when humankind is scattered over the earth, speaking different tongues, they must, of necessity, lose their connection with the original tongue, the tongue of Eden, the Tongue in which God, Adam, Eve, and the serpent spoke. All of this is to say that the punishment is nothing short of disownment.

Now, consider that Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden because of God's fear that they will seek to become *like Him*:

> And the LORD God said: "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever." Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed at the east of the garden of Eden the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way to the tree of life. (Gen. 3:22–24, KJV)

Can humanity, either in its barest nakedness or gathered together with all of its forces, inhabit a land free of prohibition? Freud thinks not. In fact, prohibition is the basis of any society or community because one must give something up, must renounce one's total freedom as a symbolic offering or sacrifice to the group. A land of total freedom would approximate Paradise, if not become Paradise itself.

Kafka agrees. Indeed, Kafka argues that "in a sense our expulsion from Paradise was a stroke of luck, for had we not been expelled, Paradise would have had to be destroyed" (1975, 29). Paradise has not been destroyed because it remains uninhabited by humanity. So we are left with only the knowledge that Paradise still exists, and the hope that we may recreate it. It is a

trace within our imagination, a fantasy we will pursue unto the destruction of our "hopes and dreams," or death.

In "Pekin and the Emperor," there is (most likely) no Emperor at all and, Kafka tells us, the idea of Pekin, itself, is absolutely impossible for the townspeople to imagine, more impossible even than believing that the Emperor and Pekin are "a cloud, peacefully voyaging beneath the sun" (1975, 17). These people, who are not bound together by an Emperor, are also privileged to have no contemporary law, only "exhortations and warnings which come to us from olden times" (17). "This very weakness," however, is one of the town's "greatest unifying influences" (18). Indeed, it is "the very ground on which [they] live" (18).

Now I am thinking of the parable, "The Imperial Messenger," where the poor messenger tries his hardest but cannot possibly carry the important, even pressing, whispered, secret news from the Emperor to you. All you can do is "sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself" (1975, 15). All you have is a dream, or a dream of a memory, that is to say, a trace left by the imagination of the person of the Emperor when in reality the Emperor is by now long dead and his now useless message can never, ever reach its addressee.

Let us return. In "The Great Wall and the Tower of Babel," Kafka compares the two monuments and reports that a scholar once compiled an exhaustive argument that the fault of the Tower of Babel lay at its foundation. He argued that the Wall, now, would become the foundation for a new Tower: "First the Wall. Then the Tower" (1975, 27).

Of course, such ideas are only comprehensible "in a spiritual sense," so, Kafka asks, why waste energy on the actual tower, which is "the result of lifelong labor of multitudes of people" (1975, 27)? Here Kafka points out the obvious symbolic equation in the story of the Tower, reminding us that the tasks of building Towers and Walls and Paradises is metaphorical, a fact that others, including God, seem to have forgotten.

Kafka's scholar's idea about the Wall and the Tower to be built upon its foundation is, according to the narrator, but one of the many "wild ideas" in the air at that time "simply because

so many were trying to join forces as far as they could for the achievement of a single aim." The wild ideas would not be tolerated were not the achievement to be so great. Yet, for Kafka, this *quintessentially human* quest is scuttled by "human nature," itself, which "can endure no restraint" and "if it binds itself it soon begins to tear madly at its bonds, until it rends everything asunder, the wall, the bonds, and its very self" (1975, 27). If human nature is designed by God, should we not say that the dispersal of humanity, the end of a common hope and dream, is built into our very nature?

There seems to be little if any restraint against the building of the Wall, and we may imagine that the same is true for the Tower. On the contrary, the builders must have loved their city and their tower, for it is indeed a great undertaking. In "The City Coat of Arms," Kafka writes of the elaborate arrangements made for the construction of the Tower and of how extraordinary slowly everything is going. Since the idea of the Tower, for Kafka, is so magnificent — and an "idea, once seized in its magnitude, can never vanish again" (1975, 37) — there is no rush. Someone or other will complete the work eventually. *The idea is the thing.*

And because the idea is a *thing* outside all possible frames of reference, it is an offense. Thus, people feared that later generations would destroy even their preliminary work, so instead of building the Tower, they set about building a city for the workers, creating unending disputes and bloody conflicts, all of which convince the leaders that the people are not ready and that the work should be delayed if not postponed entirely, for there lacks among the populace the necessary *unity*. By the second or third generation, everyone had realized the senselessness of building a tower to reach heaven but were "too deeply involved to leave the city." So everyone longed for the prophesied day when the city would be "destroyed by five successive blows from a gigantic fist" (39).

A Parable of Dancing

A tattooed Māori man keeps insisting that I dance a *haka* — a traditional thing I do not know — while standing on the back of his motorbike, tearing across the lanes of the interstate, headed to the university.

A broken-down bus thunders beside us, filled with hard-looking people, people who had been through it all, who looked as if they had lived in the wild for several months.

On top of that, or as the cause of their suffering, they had lost a competition of great importance, and what is more — almost too much! — their sacrifices were offered on our behalf, even my own.

The motorbike kept roaring. The bus kept wheezing. The Māori man kept insisting. But the people inside the bus looked at me as if they knew I understood:

It was no time for dancing.

It was no time for dancing.

Maturity and Idiosyncrasy

> "That is another of your odd notions," said the Prefect, who had a fashion of calling everything "odd" that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of "oddities" […]. "Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault," said my friend. "What nonsense you do talk!" replied the Prefect, laughing heartily. "Perhaps the mystery is a little too plain," said Dupin. "Oh, good heavens! who ever heard of such an idea?" "A little too self-evident." "Ha! ha! ha—ha! ha! ha!—ho! ho! ho!" roared our visitor, profoundly amused, "oh, Dupin, you will be the death of me yet!"
>
> — Edgar Allen Poe, "The Purloined Letter" (1845, 201)

Maturity is one of those concepts that evades us, always slipping behind the stairs, or else it has been neglected unto a dismal state, more or less detritus in a world of memes and wall-hangings that tell us in pithy phrases what maturity is.[1] Maturity is, of course, an ideal, and we may well understand it as something

1 It is a worthwhile question why, in academia and in clinical practice, we speak of symptoms and progress, health and development, or crisis and stability, but not of maturity. I suspect it has something to do with the confusion of maturity and old age, which remains reviled in many "Western" cultures: Who would want to be mature when one could, instead, be young?

that is never quite fully attained by any person. At the same time, we may consider maturity to be an ideal that some, although not all, persons achieve to some degree or other.

The question of maturity surely has something to do with an achievement of a state we would call "health," for there is no sense in speaking about maturity without speaking as well about psychological well-being. From a psychodynamic perspective, maturity has to do with the gradually decreasing reliance upon others to fulfill needs both physical and psychological. It also has to do with surviving paranoid anxieties and neurotic guilt by developing a benign inner world. It also has to do with the following paradox.

Maturity requires the holding-back or holding-onto of something special in the self, an idiosyncrasy, a secret or "incommunicado" element (Winnicott 1965, 187) that belongs only to itself and cannot be corrupted by interaction with others. It is primal, unconscious, and unrepresentable in any *direct* form.

Throughout life, the presence of this secret element — its activity in the being and doing of the individual — is what animates the individual and teaches him that he is real and alive.[2] When we remark the maturity of persons, we remark their willingness to live out, to experience, and especially to expose their secret *in a particular way.* Mature persons do not *share* their secret *per se* — it would be unsharable even if they were to try! — but they are able somehow to share, even with strangers, the fact that they have a secret that cannot be shared. If we, too, have a secret, then we can share in the sharing of secrets, although neither will ever be divulged. If one were a Lacanian,

2 Immanuel Kant (1784) famously claimed, "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* [Dare to know!] 'Have courage to use your own understanding!' Immaturity is self-imposed when we do not listen to ourselves (in a highly rarified atmosphere, admittedly) but instead listen to others or to social convention."

one might say that these ideas of maturity and idiosyncrasy open up the possibility of a double *jouissance,* the *jouissance* of sharing a secret (without actually sharing it, and thereby destroying it), and the *jouissance* of being in contact with oneself and certain others in a special way, amidst a world of others.

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It is true, of course, that "Freud did the unpleasant things for us, pointing out the reality and force of the unconscious, getting to the pain, anguish, conflict which invariably lie at the root of symptom formations" (Winnicott 1988, 36). What is "unpleasant," for Winnicott, are the intransigent realities of human development, those of the psyche and of the body, and the psyche's elaboration from a struggling and frustrated body via the use of fantasy.[3] Winnicott wants to say that in generally "healthy" persons, the psyche struggles yet finds a position or *place* from which to relate to others and to reality (the body, for instance, is an important part of "reality-feeling").[4] The capacity to feel in place has not only to do with the possession of a body but very much with the availability of the secret element, which entails, in part at least, how the individual imagines himself to be.

How the individual makes their way through the struggles of development has a guiding influence, of course, on maturation and, hence, on maturity. To say that facing these difficulties and

3 As I have suggested, the subject has to emerge "around" something. It emerges around what Winnicott calls (and what Lacan might have called) the "fringe" of the psyche-soma. This is only important insofar as it helps us recognize that both bodies and psyches must struggle to grow in healthy ways.

4 Again, what is "unpleasant" is, in many cases, as simple as the reality principle. Of course, we should have said, before even alluding to "health" as if it were a universal part of the human condition, that we are now talking about Winnicott's specific time and place and, in many ways, our own time and place, which are not so different after all. In our world, individuals tend to grow in certain ways and face certain challenges at certain times, owing to the communities in which we live and our conceptions of "health."

overcoming these obstacles without losing one's secret in neurosis or psychosis allows us to relate to each other is to say that we share a common bond of struggle and, potentially, of achievement. But what makes an individual mature is *not* that they have shared with others a set of "unpleasant" experiences, or even a shared sense of *objective* reality. It may be said that sharing experience and reality in this way makes the individual *social* or *sane,* but this is all. At the extreme, we find the individual who is *absolutely* adapted to social reality and who therefore retains no personal uniqueness or interior life.

Nevertheless, without having successfully managed their own "growing struggle" — it should have a great German noun, like *Wachstumskampf* — life stagnates, and no maturation is possible. Maturity requires having faced, without recourse to excessive defensive mechanisms, the "growing struggle" that is part of human development. Our struggles to become who we are, themselves, are already in many ways idiosyncratic in the sense that they are unique in person, time, and space, and from moment to moment.

Maturity means having experienced (or shared in the experience of) suffering, taming, and ultimately managing the many conflicts that one faces in development, from infancy through adulthood. (This, by the way, remains the "anthropology" of most object-relations theorists, if not most psychodynamically oriented theorists in general.) But maturity also means holding something back, in the ancient Greek sense, of being a bit of an "idiot."[5]

5 Speaking of "idiots," let us think for a moment of Bartleby, the Scrivener. One must develop one's personality out of material and processes that are internal to the individual, that are not merely in service of others, that are not useful or productive, that serve clear and useful ends. Much of this has been said before, as in, for instance, Giorgio Agamben's well-known essay on "Bartleby, the Scrivener." Is Melville's Bartleby mature? He is certainly idiosyncratic. But his idiosyncrasy prevents him from functioning in the world. That this turns out to be more of a critique of the world than of Bartleby is precisely at issue, for who can be mature and healthy in a world of walls, laws, strictures, and pressures that seem to multiply beyond all reason?

The term, idiosyncrasy, comes from the Greek *idios* "one's own" (see "idiom" and "idiot") and *synkrasis* meaning "temperament, comportment, or admixture of personal characteristics." The idiosyncratic individual has managed to create an absolutely unique personality, while at the same time having wrested some significant quantity of individuality from what, in our world and time, are parts of "reality."

I have suggested that being mature has something to do with the capacity for holding on to a secret while relating. It may also be said that this capacity involves the capacity for not relating, as those of us who have made it to maturity find at least some of our idiosyncrasies form a special part of self that is walled off from others, that never relates to them in a substantial way. Depending on the individual's ability to keep their secret via the use of idiosyncratic behavior, their oddity is tolerated as a harmless eccentricity, an acceptable madness.

Without much effort, we have just advanced the notion that maturity has something to do with developing a personality that is both (a) adequately rooted in social reality to be able to relate and function; and (b) preserving of its uniqueness, its idiosyncrasy.

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Now, when one thinks about adult maturity one thinks immediately of strength of character, of persons comfortable in their own skins, of a basic confidence of being and an apparent lack of excessive fear of humiliation, shame, guilt, or other neurotic or psychotic anxiety. Even on the grounds of these most incautious reflections, we arrive at the correct conclusion that not all persons are mature.

We have said that maturity is the achievement of a unique or idiosyncratic personality while having gone through or shared in the "growing struggle" that is defined by their development. It is a crucial matter whether this personality is successful in *pressing itself* into social tolerance, as it were. It determines whether the person may end up a senator or in a mental hospital or

prison. But, as to the fact of maturity itself, social consequences are of no importance, just as there are, in fact, mature persons in hospitals and prisons, and immature senators.

The idiosyncrasy of the mature person can be seen to serve no social purpose, except perhaps to mark off the individual from others. Put another way, a central quality of idiosyncrasy and uniqueness is that they *don't fit.* What *does not fit* is both terrifying and delightful and whichever designation one's idiosyncrasy earns is subject to change instant by instant. The mature individual struggles with their idiosyncrasy, to find a way to retain contact with it in a world of relating, without violating its core or essence.

I suggest that whatever permits the individual to make contact with their own idiosyncrasy, the part of their self that does not *fit* in society, is what is needed to make society tolerable to the individual and, therefore, must be in some sense present for the self (while absent for others to relate to) while relating and while in society. Its "absent presence," in turn, makes relating with the individual tolerable, even enjoyable, for others, not only because mature persons seem often to be affable, but because mature persons are in contact with something real about themselves and this is their secret, which is both available and unavailable.[6]

The mature individual is courageous enough to allow the presence of their idiosyncrasy to emerge paradoxically in relating, even though it *does not fit* into the course of actual relating. This is indeed a boon for self and others, either because it strengthens our resolve to experience our own idiosyncrasy or

6 Several social psychological theories hold that one may earn "credits" that allow one to "expend" idiosyncratic "capital" without social repercussion. For instance, if one happens to be wealthy or very intelligent, then one's idiosyncratic or creative behavior may not be seen as a "symptom" or "pathology" but as a delightful "eccentricity."

because it is a creative emanation, a burst of subjective life penetrating what can be a dull objective social reality.[7]

§

I was teaching about the complex of American individualism, where the force of "the norm" still holds but does not include not a totalitarian demand that people conform "totally" or "completely" (whatever that means), but, really, a sort of confusing demand that people conform through "performances of individuality," which amount to enactments of individual difference through accepted but often trivial channels: clothing and fashion, hairstyle, tattoos, word choices or dialect, etc. These can, of course, be quite different from, and in some cases opposed to, authentic expressions of the secret self and the creative impulse.

I sometimes use the statistical language of "standard deviations" to talk with students about "how many standard deviations from the norm" — which I conflate with "the mean," even though that isn't correct really, but just for the sake of the metaphor — their groups and families and communities will tolerate, before a person is rejected or cast out. At the same time, we think a bit about what it would look like if an American person

7 Perhaps for any endeavor into these matters to be fully satisfying we would have to have a long excursus on what "subjectivity" means. I, for one, do not find "subjectivity" to be such an interesting or problematic word. Many people do. I believe it is useful to speak about the body and the psyche (or inner world) as distinct but related entities that, under adequate conditions, form a subject who is an autonomous and whole person who can relate to others and undertake meaningful actions in the world while at the same time retaining contact with their true, idiosyncratic self in the face if life's challenges. Beyond the casual object-relations sense in which there is always a subject and an object, then, I think subjectivity means maturity and psychic health. Quite often, it is people who have failed to become subjects who attack the idea of subjectivity either as a symptom of a different problem or as a kind of evil in itself. There is likely jealousy, *ressentiment*, and a hatred of development at work here. As far as I can tell, these dynamics between an ever-changing reality, the perseverance of idiosyncrasy, and the hatred of subjectivity come as close to a definition of "the human condition" as is desirable.

somehow resisted the demand of individuality, like a character out of Gustave Flaubert.

On this note, I like to refer to the movie *Office Space,* which features a comical exchange about "flair" between Joanna (Jennifer Aniston) and her boss at a TGI Friday's sort of restaurant. She is required to wear fifteen buttons, bows, or clips attached to her suspenders or shirt. When she is called out by her boss for wearing the minimum of fifteen, she is confused, and asks if she is being asked to wear more. The frustrated boss replies by saying that she is encouraged to "express herself." The idea is, basically, that they want her *to want* to wear more flair, for herself and her own reasons, but not for any rules or proscriptions. (Of course, in some cases, if this lack of anything distinctive about a person ran deeper, it would, indeed, tell us that there is likely something gravely hurt about the person, such that her genuine personality, along with the drive to express it, has been driven underground.)

Anyway, while we were all talking about this, there was a bright, smiling, tattooed, pierced student sitting in the front row who was very engaged and who was offering some pretty smart observations, so eventually I asked her (as I ask everyone who speaks in the first weeks of class) what her name was and she said it was, "Unique." I asked "is it spelled like…" to which she immediately replied: "Yeah. U-N-I-Q-U-E."

Inside (and only inside), I thought to myself, This a perfect example of what we are talking about. What a "mind-fuck" (as they say) for this kid, who, one imagines, has been put in a very American double-bind whereby she is quite plainly expected to be "unique" (to be: Unique) and perhaps to be or become uniquely herself, but where this expectation comes not (or not at first) from any internal impulse or process but from her given name and the presumed need to live up to that name, which is, of course, the very opposite of being uniquely herself. And, we can only presume, but one imagines that a parent or family member who would name a child something like that may not

leave it at the naming but might continue to apply this kind of pressure in other ways.

§

Finally, a word must be said about the relationship between idiosyncrasy and symptoms. If symptoms are imagined to be expressions of what is repressed in the unconscious or what conflicts between conscious and unconscious realities, then symptoms have very little to do with idiosyncrasies, which emanate from the true but secret self, which, if it resides anywhere, must lie outside the unconscious — i.e., it is not *repressed* — and which gives vitality to being and doing, rather than the opposite. Similarly, if symptoms are a way of "speaking" conflict with the unconscious then idiosyncrasies are ways of "speaking" not the unconscious but the very core of the self.

Accomplishments

It is possible that accomplishments remind us precisely of things we did not dream of, that we did not dream of them, that we might have dreamt of them, had we been able to *dream,* in that particular sense, but that this capacity to dream might well interfere with our fulfillment of the accomplishment, itself.

Leo Berg's Paradox

Any idea, said Berg, drawn to its logical conclusion, leads to its opposite: purity to profanity, enlightenment to ignorance, freedom to enslavement, et cetera.

Why?

Because ideas are Attic tragedies, auto-immune diseases, the fruits of poisoned trees of poisoned roots of poisoned seeds.

Que bendito problema: endless philosophical upheaval.

But, since Berg is right, even the idea that ideas, drawn to their logical conclusions, lead to their opposites leads to *its* opposite, which is to say, dialectic, too, is false, for *hamartia* is inessential, the poison a mistake, the mere mistake of being true, a truth which nothing can survive.

On "The Purloined Letter"

A lot has been made of "The Purloined Letter." It takes work to make it great. The Queen hides a love letter from the King by merely leaving it, in her haste, face down on her desk. An ingenious Minister D— finds the letter and uses it to exercise power. In the end, a friend closely identified with the narrator, Dupin, who has been ostensibly helping the Prefect of the Police, ultimately barters with him for the letter, itself, which Dupin turns out to hold on his very person.

The police have been useless in their searches, in spite of the fact that everything has been inspected in the Minister's hotel with, literally, microscopic detail. But, of course, the Minister has perhaps taken a clue from his victim and has hidden it in an equally obvious place, barely concealing it by adding another seal and by damaging its outer appearance.

"The seekers have such an immutable notion of reality that they fail to notice that *their search tends to transform it into its object*" (Lacan 2006, 17, emphasis added). The search in the imagination becomes nothing but a set of procedures that are, in some ways, too concrete (too real) to find a letter that may or may not be present, for they operate on the assumption that nothing is ever truly hidden, that what is hidden is "what is *not in its place*" (17, emphasis in original).

This is the first of two important ideas.

The second arises when we remark that the Prefect's methods have been guided only by the Prefect and his way of thinking. They are not those of a thief. Absent is the requisite imagination to solve the puzzle:

> The Prefect and his cohort fail so frequently, first, by default of this identification, and, secondly, by ill-admeasurement, or rather through non-admeasurement, of the intellect with which they are engaged. They consider only their own ideas of ingenuity; and, in searching for anything hidden, advert only to the modes in which they would have hidden it. They are right in this much — that their own ingenuity is a faithful representative of that of the mass; but when the cunning of the individual felon is diverse in character from their own, the felon foils them, of course. This always happens when it is above their own, and very usually when it is below […]. What, for example, in this case of D—, has been done to vary the principle of action? What is all this boring, and probing, and sounding, and scrutinizing with the microscope and dividing the surface of the building into registered square inches — what is it all but an exaggeration of the application of the one principle or set of principles of search, which are based upon the one set of notions regarding human ingenuity, to which the Prefect, in the long routine of his duty, has been accustomed? […] Odds are […] that any idea embraced by the public, any received convention, is foolishness, because it has merely become agreeable to the greatest number. (8–9)

The point of the tale is, of course, *not* that the best hiding place is in plain view, nor is it, pace Lacan, that "the effects of the signifying chain […] follow the displacement of the signifier so faithfully that imaginary factors, despite their inertia, figure only as shadows and reflections therein" (6). Rather, the moment Dupin finds that he can imagine being a thief, he becomes one. Or, put another way, his imagination is stronger for him than reality, for he relies on his (imaginary) identification with Minister D— to commit his crime.

Thus, Dupin alone can understand the situation and, in the end, we learn only of the note written inside the letter hidden by Dupin in the place of the letter he stole from Minister D—: *"Un dessein si funeste, S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste"* ("Such a disastrous plan, if not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes") (14).

Atreus and Thyestes are involved in a long story of twin brothers, infidelity, and murder. The point is that Thyestes is worse and these final words are a grave insult, for which the Minister D— can pay no revenge lest he confess to the stealing of the letter. (Of course, if the Minister and Dupin are now closely identified, the question arises, How much do these words apply to Dupin's theft as they do to the Minister's?)

Consider the use of "identification" in speaking of the child's game "even or odd," where Dupin suggests that the ability to catch out one's enemy relies on "merely an identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent" (8). In the end, although masked by cleverness, one gives oneself over to the other:

> "'When I wish to find out how wise, or how stupid, or how good, or how wicked is any one, or what are his thoughts at the moment, I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as possible, in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression.' This response of the schoolboy lies at the bottom of all the spurious profundity which has been attributed to Rochefoucauld, to La Bougive, to Machiavelli, and to Campanella." "And the identification," I said, "of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent, depends, if I understand you aright, upon the accuracy with which the opponent's intellect is admeasured." (Poe 1845, 210)

And later:

> No sooner had I glanced at this letter, than I concluded it to be that of which I was in search. To be sure, it was, to all appearance, radically different from the one of which the Prefect had read us so minute a description. Here the seal was large and black, with the D— cipher; there it was small and red, with the ducal arms of the S— family. (13)

Is it not because Dupin is the Minister's twin that he is able instantly to find a letter that, already missed by a hundred searchers, does not even resemble its description? Lacan wishes to say that the letter (*la lettre;* so the comparison between meanings of the word "letters" begins) is the symbol of "but an absence. This is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be or not be somewhere but rather that, unlike them, it will be and will not be where it is wherever it goes." (17) Fine, but, rather, we should say, the letter makes thieves of persons. Its *imaginary* existence exerts and is, indeed, the *primum movens,* the thing that drives this tale of persons and kingdoms.

Transcendent Beasts

What we long for is so contradictory, that perhaps it is worth advancing the possibility — the probability — that we long for contradiction itself. We wish to feel alive, but also to be safe from life, out of its fearsome fray. We long for the peace of death, yet cling to the passions of living. We wish to be in control, in charge of what we think and feel and do, and yet we wish to obey the will of a greater power, to submit and decide nothing. We want freedom but we also want its opposite, absolute certainty. We wish to be heroes, mature persons, eternal children, social sages, transcendent beasts. We wish to be each and all of these for unpredictable and inconsistent periods of time but precisely when we wish, unless we wish to be but one thing, none of these, and find security in knowing no other possibility.

And even were perfect, constant, spiritual, intellectual, physical bliss possible, soon we would cry out in numbness and dejection, "Why can I feel nothing other than this bliss?"; "How long must I endure it?"; "I would like to be able to feel pain again, boredom again, to feel hungry and tired and poor again."

It may be that human beings do not want one thing, nor even a coherent set of things, but want, as Freud might have said, the pleasurable feeling that arises from change itself, jostling in alternation, now as Schopenhauer might have said, between pain and boredom. To live like an animal, then like a monk,

then like a human, then a rock, then to feel alive, then to be aloof from life, in intervals or all at once.

It is the difference between the ranges of our feelings and thoughts; it is the range itself that defines the expanse of our souls and it is the intervals, as if they could be measured in octaves like a vocal capacity, and the desires to play all the notes, the harmonious and the discordant, the high and the low, and then not to play at all, that we need.

In that sense, our desires and thoughts are not contradictory. Two pieces of music, if played simultaneously, certainly create dissonance. And the fact that a piano has keys which, in certain combinations, ruin each other no more confuses the piano than it does the player. But unlike the piano, the player has a memory of all the notes he has played.

The Problem with Eckhart Tolle

> "All problems are illusions of the mind."
>
> — Eckhart Tolle (2004, 64)

Tolle implies that thinking is always or primarily negative, that thinking cannot be a path to "presence." He claims that thinking must subside for presence to arise. Here is an attack on thinking, as if thinking itself were responsible for our problems, as if we ought to just stop thinking and then we would be happier. Thinking can, like all things, lead to both positive and negative outcomes, but I'd say there is a way to use thinking to get to "the now," to think oneself into better, fuller states of being, to think oneself out of non-being and denial and avoidance and repression. Some of those ways are obvious, like psychoanalysis and self-analysis and self-reflection, and study, and reading, and talking with friends and colleagues, and even listening to a TED Talk by Eckhart Tolle.

Part of the problem is that Tolle seems to believe that being "present" in the now is always or primarily pleasant. You automatically "appreciate" your surroundings and your body and your aliveness and say, "Oh how beautiful that I am alive and have a body," and you look at the sky or the tree and say again, "How lovely." But being present means sometimes being in an unpleasant state: illness, pain, boredom, desire, anxiety, terror,

obsession. That, and the fact that we can't predict whether our "now" will be pleasant or unpleasant, is part of why people avoid the now so often. Finding the now does not, in my opinion, release us from the human condition, which is in many ways a terrible and tragic condition in which we are sort of stuck in our limited bodies, aware we are stuck in them, aware we are going to die soon and forever, living in a universe bigger than we can comprehend where our actions may be utterly meaningless, subject to attachments to and histories with others whom we did not get to choose, possessing minds and psyches that are not entirely under our control, feeling feelings and desires we can't act on or even fully know.

To add to that, we each have some degree of personal pain: the pains we have suffered in our own lives, due to history or experience, psychological makeup, physical health or unhealth, scars and vulnerabilities, weaknesses, etc. Of course, one's personal pain is also human pain in the sense that others, while not suffering exactly as one has suffered, can relate, and have suffered similar or worse or less terrible things all to varying degrees. So being in the now also entails being in human pain, and sometimes even in worse pain than one is in when distracting oneself from one's pain by watching tv or doing yoga.

I don't think we have to relish our human pain, and there is nothing wrong with doing things that take our minds off of it, things we enjoy, but I do think we should accept that it is there, that it is real, that finding it is not some *error* we are making. Recognizing that there is such a thing as human pain, and that others have had it, and that it is real, can make one feel more grounded, more human, and more alive.

I am not released from pain. I feel human pain and rather intensely, and have for most of my life. There are several ways one could explain this, either sympathetically (i.e., I have emotional sensitivity, an accurate perception of the human condition, an unwillingness to resort to the usual defense mechanisms), or unsympathetically (I have an anxiety disorder, I am "over-thinking," I had a troubled childhood, etc.), but these explanations don't really matter so long as human pain is not

blamed on the individual who merely experiences it simply because they experience it.

Tolle loses me (not that he confuses me, but I disagree) when he says that we possess some other transcendent inner, deeper consciousness ("light of awareness" or "spacious awareness" [2021]) that is not part of our person, our identity, our personal history, our life and family. Such a fantasy implies that I can escape my human pain and even other life-related pains and annoyances and anxieties by denying the importance of my personhood and identifying myself with something (corporate and much bigger) that, almost by definition, has nothing to do with me.

As historical human persons, we created ideas of "God," "consciousness," "universe," and even "transcendent light," and in creating them, we decided to define them as things that are bigger and better than us as persons, and then we said that we can use them to escape ourselves as persons by making offerings of ourselves unto them.

If being spiritual means being connected with a universal corporate thing that has nothing much to do with me, then my living and dying are not such big deals because there is nothing to gain or lose. Everything that matters is always already there. Here is the real fantasy of the universal consciousness: that we can become indifferent about ourselves and escape our pain by denying its reality and importance and by identifying ourselves with something that is not ourselves at all, indeed, with something utterly foreign.

§

Arthur Rimbaud wrote famously that he had made *"la magique étude Du Bonheur, que nul n'élude."* ("the magic study Of Happiness, that no one eludes" [2005, 210–11]). He is condemned to happiness, to be condemned to search for happiness, as are we all. He knows that our own contentment is the source and ground of everything, an *idée fixe,* to which we permanently

return. But Rimbaud was a miserable man. This too he knew: "I have always considered that it is impossible to live more painfully than I do" (2005, 427).

So, as for many artists, misery became a happiness greater than happiness. It is possible that there is no reason to do anything on grounds other than the increase of one's own happiness. It is even possible that no one does, in fact, do anything for reasons other than their own happiness. Do we live in a day with too much or too little sacrifice? If there is nothing for which we may reasonably and meaningfully sacrifice our happiness, then the only viable end of our actions is our own happiness. To what end? Is there not a higher truth to which we should be willing to submit? What if that truth were that we should never seek our own happiness? Wouldn't we hate that idea? So the sacrifice must be undertaken willingly.

To make things more complicated, let us consider the case of a person for whom a moral psychology of happiness is problematic. He needs something toward which to work, something for which to fight, something in which to believe, something for which to sacrifice and struggle. To tell this man that the only end of action is his own contentment is to condemn him to the greatest unhappiness. If he understands us and is convinced, he will lose the ability to live. Moreover, he will have lost the ability to be happy, because, for him, happiness for the sake of happiness, happiness in search of happiness, happiness as the end of human action is repugnant, disgraceful. If such a man tries to make a life for himself organized upon the principle of augmenting and preserving his own happiness, he will surely come to no good. He will feel sick with himself. He will spend his time trying to find ways to increase his happiness, but with every minute thus spent, his pleasure will decrease. He will end by repulsing himself with his own life.

Happiness must be an indirect route. To approach happiness straight on is disastrous. It is a fundamental quality of the human psyche that pleasure must be partially cheated, stolen from an ulterior but usually moral motive. That is, we have to gain our pleasures and our happinesses indirectly, on the way to

doing something else, in between other pursuits, even in misery. For the most part, to seek a thing destroys it. Oblation separates humans from beasts.

Traumatic Repetition

The most understandable thing about traumatic repetition is that the foundation of trauma fantasy is the desire *never* to undergo the trauma again. The tragedy and irony of traumatic repetition is that the traumatized person ends up repeating trauma in this very attempt never to undergo trauma again. For, unconsciously, the desire is slightly different; it is to repeat the experience until it is "mastered." The unconscious goal of traumatic repetition is *not really* to let the trauma speak, as someone like Cathy Caruth would have it (1996), but rather to defeat the trauma once and for all. Unfortunately, this is precisely what can never happen.

If one feels that one has experienced a "safe place" before, it was really a sort of naivety that one was fortunate enough to know, an imagination of a time before, perhaps lasting only for a few days of life. The agony of trauma makes us forget that the recovery of this (lost, imaginary) perfection is impossible, and we tend to believe that it was the trauma, rather than the necessary and structural forces of social existence and human development, that burgled our perfection.

The truth is that, until we faced trauma, we did not *need* to insist that the world be perfect in order for the world to be adequate. But we forget, and, instead, believe that, before the trauma, the world was in fact perfect, whereas now it is perni-

cious to perfection, and we conclude that to overcome the danger we must find a way to secure perfection, which is of course a beautiful yet tragic idea.

Thus, we mistakenly believe that the way to cope with trauma is to strengthen ourselves, to protect ourselves, to control circumstances, or to otherwise arrange things such that we are better prepared to take on any danger to perfection, which, of course, includes everything imaginable, save perfection itself. This only fuels the fantasy that trauma can be prevented, and that our traumas *could have been* prevented, which quickly slides into the notion that our trauma *can still be prevented,* which means that someone or something will fail to prevent a trauma that we cannot yet conceive of, such a distance our idea of perfection takes us.

I take it that trauma is adequately if curtly defined for our purposes as that which gets behind our defenses. Trauma is *no defense.* So to imagine that we can defend against that which, by definition, gets past every conceivable defense is to set ourselves up for impossible failure. But of course that is exactly the point! No trauma can be prepared for or protected against, and yet we exercise our efforts, even extreme, building walls and towers that will inevitably fail. Sisyphean absurdity, thus, becomes the defense against trauma *par excellence.*

The need to repeat the traumatic situation and dynamic — the experience of persecution as coming from "outside," an overwhelming force that defeats the self's attempts to stave it off, and the cycle by which the self finds a means of keeping the persecutory force at bay which gradually gives way — is derived from a sort of addictive cycle, in which one suffers the lows of worry and traumatic penetration in order to hold on to the hope of the heights of fantasied perfect protection.

Put another way, traumatic repetition derives from the fantasy of finding an inviolable defense, which is really a recovery of the pre-traumatized (imagined) self, a condition of "safe place" in which there are no threats because all threats are absorbed by the other (the mother figure). Here, therefore, we can experience perfect freedom and perfect relief. Ultimately, this amounts

to an identification with the other that is the perfect defense against trauma precisely because they displace its object in fantasy — an imaginary union in which the self is absorbed into the other who is strong enough to defend against trauma. My daughter says to my wife, "I want to crawl back in your belly."

What has to be given up is this fantasy of perfect bliss, since the fantasy of perfect bliss saves one, in the short term, from the hardest impacts of trauma the way a pain drug saves one from physical pain, but the traumatized person's addiction to chasing after the high provided by the fantasy is what inevitably brings down upon them the reality of the failure to achieve perfect bliss and perfect luck and perfect care from others, and this failure (which is normal and could realistically be expected, because, after all, life does not normally feel as good as it feels when one is on pain pills) is experienced in the form of traumatic persecution and, typically, a repetition of the pattern that was involved with the traumatic setting. Here is Søren Kierkegaard in *Either/Or*:

> My grief is my castle, which like an eagle's nest is built high up on the mountain peaks among the clouds; nothing can storm it. From it I fly down into reality to seize my prey; but I do not remain down there, I bring it home with me, and this prey is a picture I weave into the tapestries of my palace. There I live as one dead […]. Everything finite and accidental is forgotten and erased. (1843, 35)

We say, "Why can I not have even this?"; "Why must everything be so difficult for me?"; "Why must every possibility provoke in me such fear and dread?" The answer to such questions is, because we are still imagining and trying to return to a pre-traumatized place or condition that never existed. Therefore, we would not be wrong to say that, in some sense, the trauma *created,* in us, the fantasy of a perfection that would redeem us from trauma, and our traumatic repetitions are likewise hoped to give rise in us to the accomplishment of the perfection that is

only made conceivable or desirable by trauma, such that trauma and perfection risk becoming. At the very least, we may say that trauma and perfection are linked in the way that pain and relief from pain are linked:

> I am again myself… The discord in my nature is resolved, I am again unified… The snares in which I have been entangled are hewn asunder, the magic spell which bewitched me so that I could not return to myself has now been broken… It is over, my yawl is afloat… I belong to the idea. When that beckons me I follow, when it appoints a tryst I await it day and night… when the idea calls I forsake everything…. (Kierkegaard 1843, 136)

The person has been traumatized. Their life will never be the same. It is now impossible for that person not to know or remember the terrible feelings of trauma. They are now a part of the universe of real things that happen to people and that happened to them. A Paradise free of trauma and terror does not exist. But a place where there is relatively little trauma and terror may exist. And this place can be enjoyable to live in so long as one gives up the hope for a Paradise that does not exist. If one believes one cannot be happy without finding Paradise, then the world in which one lives can only appear a nightmarish realm of deprivation and cruelty.

Boredom

Enough has now been written on boredom that one should think that boredom were actually quite exciting. Perhaps it is! I wish to say that boredom is in many ways overly exciting, is *pregnant* with possibility, just as the term *pregnant* here is *pregnant* with signification, in the way a Freudian might explain the psychic economy of sensory excitation. As such, I shall be very brief in the hope of not being boring.

There is no denying that, as Adam Phillips writes: "Every child's life is punctuated by spells of boredom: that state of suspended anticipation in which things are started and nothing begins, the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire" (1993, 52), and that "experiencing a frustrating pause in his usually mobile attention and absorption, the bored child quickly becomes preoccupied by his lack of preoccupation. Not exactly waiting for someone else, he is, as it were, waiting for himself. Neither hopeless nor expectant, neither intent nor resigned, the child is in a dull helplessness of possibility and dismay" (53).

Phillips is also right that there are certain virtues in the capacity to be bored, but this is distinct from the experience of boredom, itself. When we are bored we are without desire, waiting for desire, waiting for ourselves to show up. Boredom is the temporary hopelessness of a wish, not the hopelessness

that a wish will come true, but, rather, the absence of wishing altogether.

But boredom (which must be differentiated from idleness) is nothing to be sneezed at. I imagine a boredom that drives persons well beyond distraction, to destruction. Enough boredom and one begins to experience the world as that which has no relation to the (absent) wishes of the individual, which is to say that the individual has been taken out of the world, opening up all sorts of possibilities (including the hatred of life).

Kierkegaard begins with "the principle that all men are bores. Surely no one will prove himself so great a bore as to contradict me in this. […] [I]f my principle is true, one need only consider how ruinous boredom is for humanity. […] Boredom is the root of all evil. Strange that boredom, in itself so staid and solid, should have such power to set in motion" (1843, 21–22). And yet the repulsion and its force are not adequately recognized, so that we come to allow adults to become bored and boring:

> What wonder, then, that the world goes from bad to worse, and that its evils increase more and more, as boredom increases, and boredom is the root of all evil. The history of this can be traced from the very beginning of the world. The gods were bored, and so they created man. Adam was bored because he was alone, and so Eve was created. Thus boredom entered the world, and increased in proportion to the increase of population […]. To divert themselves they conceived the idea of constructing a tower high enough to reach the heavens. This idea is itself as boring as the tower was high, and constitutes a terrible proof of how boredom gained the upper hand. The nations were scattered over the earth, just as they now travel abroad, but they continue to be bored. (22–23)

Because there is no individual, there is no wish. In this state, one is poor in spirit, even destitute.

Toes

Her toes had given way, or, rather, the foremost parts of her toes, bit by bit, one by one, like regular offerings to *Hermes* or *Nike*.

Her right foot was a claw, black angry talons leaping out beyond her nailbeds.

It may have been blood clots.

She was now on Warfarin.

It could have been frostbite.

She had been walking in the snow and ice.

We had just celebrated our seventeenth wedding anniversary.

It was most likely Raynaud's.

She had been walking in the snow and ice.

Her doctors were useless, failed us again and again.

But this wasn't related to the massive depression that hit me right when things got bad.

It was not related.

The depression was severe and long-lasting.

My doctors were useless, failed us again and again.

The loss of her toes was a grizzly calendar of all we had lost, of all that had failed us, inexorably, like excellence, recognition, sanity, lawyers, toes.

Each year, we grew humbler, trod more carefully, and loved each other more.

Change

We make outward changes
wishing they were inward changes
wishing we could change into something
(without terrible sacrificing)
we should never have to change.

Broken

Essential is permitting the self to be broken when it is broken — some would say, *all of the time.* The mistake is to be terrified, to make a terror of this distance from ourselves. Such terror entails a kind of paralysis that covers up the meaning of what is broken, of precisely what is missing, until this *paralysie terrible* becomes a macabre masquerade, a rite of hiding, that can never be let down.

A Parable of Davids

My long-dead uncle David Hanhilammi and my former (living) teacher and friend, David Levine, are the same but radically distinct Davids.

It is impossible to speak to one without speaking to the other yet, during cocktail hour, I put on different ways of speaking to each of them in turn, which cracks me into pieces.

My primary fears are:

a) that I will be too cavalier in my speech for my former teacher and friend, that he will reject me and leave me friend- and teacher-less;
b) that I will be too unfamiliar in my speech and so offend my uncle;
c) that in trying to shift back and forth between two ways of behaving, I will alienate and disappoint both Davids.

I am to give a speech honoring one or both of the Davids at MENSA's Annual Gathering, normally a very stupid occasion — truthfully, the occasion is only stupid to certain attendees, those who attend as spectators might attend a curiosity, ever wary of being drawn in to what is being offered, always *smirking to themselves.*

Of course, I know far more about MENSA than do either my former teacher and friend or my long-dead uncle.

But this knowledge is useless to the Davids.

They are so far and so high above it, it is as if they were there to honor me.

I am wholly unprepared to say anything about either David — how could I, without upsetting the general audience, now clearly consisting entirely of their devotees?

In any case, after my clumsy, humiliating speech, I remark both Davids together, outside, in a convertible sportscar, with mirrored sunglasses on, reflecting everything we are back onto us, *smirking to themselves.*

A Paradoxical Haircut

I am receiving a haircut from a woman who declared at the outset that she only had a few minutes, only a moment really, not even a moment but a fraction of a second, for she was extraordinarily pressed.

It was a hard situation for her, and I felt for her, and yet she had agreed to cut my hair and I felt that I deserved to have a haircut all the same.

In spite of her hurry, she spent hours working.

Hours and hours — day passed into night and into day again — and her obsession, which was also my own obsession, with cutting my hair grew stronger by the hour, just as my anxiety about her pressing alternative appointment became nearly intolerable.

Finally, she was finished and I was left with an utterly bald head full of scratches, cuts, gouges, and unsightly patches.

What she had realized, upon my very head, was a perfect picture of the unconscious.

How could I be dismayed?

The Price of True Achievement

The price of true achievement is the soul, itself;
for what wisdom can come — *There is no rest!* —
to those who possess the requisite zealousness?

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