the gaze and the attention by making it attractive), or of making it possible to witness the event, as an event in nature, through the sublime artifice of a style.

8. Antislogans

It may be useful to compare novels in three lines with slogans, which, though also quite brief, cannot be interpreted. Rather, they exist to be repeated. Slogans usually function as passwords: someone repeats one which you also repeat; this can make possible an identification, a sense of belonging, whose mechanism is rarely discussed or analyzed. Sometimes we suppose that operation amounts to understanding their meaning. It is relatively easy to recognize the meaninglessness of slogans that we don't like. Example: what does

SUPPORT OUR TROOPS

mean? Out of a certain pride, perhaps, many of us have a hard time admitting that the slogans that we like are also meaningless. Example: what exactly does

NO GODS
NO MASTERS

mean? An even more difficult one to figure out is

THIS IS WHAT
DEMOCRACY
LOOKS LIKE

"Looks like?" What are we witnesses to? Any of these slogans, and hundreds more like them, function by means of mediatic proliferation in various everyday milieus. Their function is not to provide information, much less to provoke thought.

The Impossible, Patience

Critical Essays 2007-2013

Alejandro de Acosta

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> by creating a world of his own or, to put it more correctly, by imposing a new and more pleasing order on the things that make up his world.[18]

The child, who has been any of us, either plays alone or constructs what Freud calls a

> *closed psychical system*[19]

with others within which the new and more pleasing order may be communicated. Beginning in adolescence, play turns to fantasy and daydream, apparently incommunicable. The stylist, however, through a combination of talent and discipline, is able to reconstruct the closed psychical system with his or her readers. It is in this sense that I suggest Fénéon's style communicates his optic or gaze, his attitude, even some trace of his way of life. So, when Freud suggests that

> … the unreality of the writer's world has important consequences for artistic technique: there are many things that could afford no enjoyment in reality, but can do so in the play of fantasy, and many excitations that are in themselves painful, but can give pleasure to the writer's audience …[20]

I am compelled to say much the same for Fénéon. It is not so much that the style directly communicates his attitude or ethics, let alone a command to imitate one or take the other on. It is rather a matter of translation (from the banal to the amusing or remarkable) and seduction (an invitation to share

[18] "The Creative Writer and Daydreaming," in *The Uncanny*, 25.
[19] Ibid., 27.
[20] Ibid., 26.

Fénéon attempted to develop a coherent beauty in his own life, folding in the familiar anarchist impulse to solidarity with others, by inflecting it in a Stoic manner. But let us not get confused with oblique appeals to dandyism, anarchism, and Stoicism. These are ultimately so many vague sign-posts. I can only hope Fénéon would have laughed at their crudity. What matters is the construction of a new relation to these sundry accidents, these many minor events. The suffering of another is not to be multiplied; rather, it is to be witnessed, and perhaps responded to.

Perhaps what we need is a prose that makes us witnesses to events in *this* way, without interpellating us as subjects of a pedestrian morality, good average citizens, or consumers of the news. That is the importance of emphasizing the pathos of the event itself, in its ultimately indescribable absurdity or banality. F. F.'s novels do not communicate suffering, but, paradoxically, bring pleasure.

7. Daydream of Life

Freud had already, one year before the novels, described the joke or witticism as an event in language in search of pleasure.[17] He underlined brevity as one of its principal mechanisms. One year after them, in an essay on the relation between creative writing and daydreaming, Freud proposed that it is the characteristic operation of great stylists to bring their readers pleasure, even when their subject matter would otherwise leave us cool or even repel us. He compared the stylist to a child:

> We may perhaps say that every
> child at play behaves like a writer,

[17] *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, 146, 163, for example. He compares this brevity to the condensation characteristic of dreams.

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through. That is the pivot of Fénéon's improvement of the *faits-divers* genre: he wrote about brutal, accidental, bizarre events in a voice at once intelligent and ataractic.

Given such events, given especially an aleatory series of accidents, we might find ourselves trying to explain them, producing a narrative. We call upon, depending on our proclivities, psychological or social forces. Many of the novels, for example, concern domestic violence, inebriated firefights, bombs or fake bombs (fake seems more common). Our theories, those we have taken on in good or bad taste, seem to explain or interpret these seemingly random occurrences. Indeed, Fénéon may have been hinting: *please interpret here.* Yes, feel whatever you might. However, if there is something ataractic in the novels, the opposite intention also emerges: *do not interpret; let the event's pathos shine through.* So I say F. F.'s style is a Stoicism in short-prose, inasmuch as he, the writer, is unmoved. In terms of humor: deadpan. And Fénéon's dry wit encapsulates precisely this contradiction. Of Jarry's absurdist way of life, Robert Shattuck writes:

> Applied systematically to all things, including literature, the attitude became a method of humor based on logic perpetually reversing its terms.
>
> A Negro fled from a bar in Paris without paying for his drinks; in his account Jarry affirms that, not at all a criminal, the man must have been an explorer from Africa investigating European civilization and caught without "native" currency. It is all a matter of point of view.[16]

[16] *The Banquet Years*, 237.

Simply, they are too well written to be news, immediately suggesting *nouvelles* as novels. Transforming banality into an anonymous pathos that he compressed into each line, F. F. invited or seduced another pathos, a care in reading and interpreting.

> Before jumping into the Seine, where he died, M. Doucrain had written in his notebook, "Forgive me, Dad. I like you."
>
> Sixty-year-old Gallot, of Saint-Ouen, was arrested just as he was beginning to impart to some soldiers his anti-military sentiments.
>
> Fencing master Pictori was wounded, perhaps fatally, by the thrust of an amateur, M. Breugnot.
>
> Although none hit home, six rounds were exchanged at the Montagne du Roule between the mayor of Cherbourg and a journalist.
>
> The sinister prowler seen by the mechanic Gicquel near the Herblay train station has been identified: Jules Ménard, snail collector.

Fénéon's brief novels construct a different mode of relation to events. His style mutated the usually dull style of journalistic prose (banal report of banal event) by exaggerating its objective tone, taking it further in the direction of impassivity. Rather than assuming a predictable emotional response on the part of the reader, F. F. allowed the icomprehensible pathos of the collision or mixture of bodies that is the event to shine

Sometimes with humor. Recall the interrogation's parenthesis:

> (Explosion of laughter).

Many of the novels have a punchline effect. That is one of Fénéon's techniques: if someone has died, for example, that is the last word. But, as Freud wrote of jokes,

> *... we do not in the strict sense know what we are laughing at.*[14]

6. Ataraxia

Beyond urgency, brevity, its compression, suggests a kind of gaze or glance that is simultaneously reserved and intensely attentive. It is the signature of an aesthetic but also an ethic: a way of life. We are already, as always, investigating the transformation of everyday life into art. It seems that this mutation requires an attunement of attention or perception. Each novel is not only the trace of an evanescent event; it also bears the signature of the way Fénéon read the wire reports he perused to compose the column. The novels, that is, suggest a discipline of attention or observation. Let us imagine that Fénéon trained himself in this attention and was able to make it available in the form of novels in three lines. A perceptive reader, a careful reader, and sometimes a lucky reader might find that, as James put it,

> *the drowsy assent is gone.*[15]

---

[14] *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, 37.

[15] Because of "a shock from the incongruity," which I would refer to what I have been calling "style." "The Stream of Thought," in *Principles of Psychology*, 263.

> can detail all the atmospheres of a
> season, all the cases of an epidemic,
> all the haggling of the hosiers of every
> town, the phrases and pitches of all
> the sounds of all the instruments
> and of all the voices of a hundred
> singers and two hundred musicians,
> together with the phases, according
> to the position of each listener or
> participant, which the ear is unable to
> seize.[13]

An entire world hangs in suspension behind each novel. How is it to be discovered?

> Frogs, sucked up from Belgian ponds
> by the storm, rained down on the
> streets of the red-light district of
> Dunkirk.
>
> There is no longer a God even for
> drunkards. Kersilie, of Saint-Germain,
> who had mistaken the window for the
> door, is dead.

(seduction)

> Instead of 175,000 francs in the
> coffers deposited with the tax collector
> at Sousse, there was nothing.
>
> Thinking he recognized, yesterday,
> the men who assaulted him on
> Monday, M. Liester, of Clichy, fired.
> Naturally he hit a passerby, M.
> Bardet.

[13] *Opinions and Exploits of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician* (Chapter 36, "Concerning the Line").

Introduction: Proximity

The book's form

As I wrote the essays gathered in this collection I passed from one writing plan to another. Around seven or eight years ago, following instructive reading of Montaigne, Hume, and Gracián, I had conceived a plan to compose a series of essays. Each would defend an indefensible thesis or at least inhabit a difficult, paradoxical perspective.[1] This was partly out of sheer appreciation for the form and a consequent desire to explore it, but also out of a need to find a way to express what I had to say, insofar as I sometimes felt myself beyond common sense, in a less than prescriptive voice. I was not disposed to continue writing in the prose that composed some of my first published forays into the topics discussed here, which are perhaps more articles or papers than essays. It occurred to me to splice contradiction and abstraction into the flexibility and personable tone of the essay (thus the inclusion of Gracián—certainly not an essayist—in the above list), adding some of the terse contrariness of the thesis. It seemed to me this would prove healthy in two respects: it would save me from the destiny of a certain prose, called "academic" by its detractors, and also, perhaps, counteract what I perceived (and ever more continue to perceive) as the linguistic rigidity around some vibrant subversive projects and in most anti-political conversations. But as the years after 2010 unfolded, I found myself less in the mode

[1] E.g. "Boredom is not counter-revolutionary"; "Seriousness is a disease"; "Teaching is impossible".

of composing essays serially and largely in solitude, according to my older plan, and more in one of dialogue with people from the North American anarchist space or milieu[2]—responding to requests for contributions, or simply acknowledging the appearance of interesting new persons, discussions, readings, and events. In that way a plan for a book of essays on previously selected topics (seduction, boredom, survival, solitude, masks,

[2] One way to understand the phrases *anarchist space* and *milieu* (which, despite their different origins, I use interchangeably) is that they stand in where one might otherwise find the name of an organization or party, actual or imaginary, or their extension in classical ideological form: *anarchism*. I use *space* and *milieu* neutrally, to refer to a diffuse idea-space in turbulent relation to punctual actions; others use *milieu*, especially, to condemn those who participate in this idea-space-inturbulent-relation-to-actions and not activist or political organizations. My neutral use of these terms echoes, so I think, an orientation critical of that activist and organizational rhetoric in which the idea-space is dismissed as subcultural, even as we are exhorted to orient ourselves around organizations and their social outreach, which is why I rarely write about *anarchism* and more often about *anarchists* or *anarchy*. The idea-space is indeed for the most part subcultural, but that is as much something to meditate on as it is something to criticize. That activist (and militant) organizations repeatedly fail to do what they say they do has something to do with the fact that they repeatedly fail to say what they are, to others, of course, but to themselves first of all. The micro-society of activists and organizing is not first of all a subculture, but one stage where this comedy is played out; subculture is a variant of this comedy of failing to say what one is doing, thinking, etc., which sometimes overlaps with that micro-society, and sometimes, as in the case of the facets of the milieu that concern me most, does not. I would say that the principal characteristics of *my* milieu or space are, first, that it is very silly in all its seriousness; secondly, that it sometimes constitutes itself as a *pragma*, as the matter that there is to think about, and this sometimes allows passage to thinking concretely about other matters of greater importance. It also ceases to be that *pragma* with great regularity, which is what makes some refer to generations within it. (But sociological demographics, or developmental psychology, for that matter, will only offer approximations in this case.) In the former case we might indeed call it the anarchist *pragma*, but only if the latter case is then to be named the anarchist *middling*. Which is to say that in this oscillation "it" couples tragedy to comedy often enough to provoke thought and stimulate action.

> Eager for plenary indulgences,
> burglars emptied a shop of religious
> articles during the pilgrimage at
> Clichy-sous-Bois.
>
> Some citizens of Boulogne half-
> lynched stevedore Berneux. His
> crime? Shouting "Down with the
> army!" when a work detail marched
> by.

(pathos)

> Silot, a valet, installed an amusing
> woman in his absent master's house
> in Neuilly, then disappeared, taking
> everything but her.
>
> In a tent near Aïn-Fakroun, a 6-year-
> old Arab girl was incinerated by
> lightning, by the side of her mother,
> who was driven mad by it.

Compression that suggests urgency: this means an accelerated pace, the sense that thoughts and actions have been condensed, and therefore the imminence of the reverse operation—opening back up, expanding, exploding. A sudden release, a sudden decompression in the emergency novel. Semiotically: a bomb. Mallarmé is supposed to have sweetly said,

> *la vraie bombe c'est le livre.*

For his part, Alfred Jarry, in the chapter dedicated to his friend Fénéon in his *Faustroll*, wrote:

> … a single line drawn in chalk on a
> blackboard two and a half meters long

communicates a certain urgency. A clue to understanding the passage from brevity to urgency may be discovered in an equally compressed book review. Here is F. F. on *The Brothers Karamazov*:

> A lot of characters. For each a lot of
> cucumbers. Quantities of mysterious
> sufferings and adventures in
> abundance. Two volumes. Interesting
> milieu for curious westerners:
> convents, courtrooms, etc.[11]

Like the novels, this review is witty and brief, but hardly dismissive. It is evocative, allowing one a mysterious glimpse at Dostoyevski's novel. This review is a second clue to understanding how brevity and wit co-operate. If a lengthy novel can be folded into a review that resembles a novel in three lines, could we interpret brief novels as capable of unfolding back into the form of a lengthy narrative? Yes, but only if they are written with the utmost care. That would be the difference that style makes: the difference, that is, between writing the *faits-divers* badly and writing them well. These anecdotes of random and everyday brutality could be read as so many unwritten full-length novels. They are novels with no author, or novels whose author is humanity, *Hombre*. F. F. did not choose anonymity; rather, he discovered himself at work, at *Le Matin*, positioned as an anonymous writer, and affirmed that anonymity. He began to transmit unwritten full-length novels, all the more compelling for that.[12] They are the novels of all and none.

[11] Halperin, 7.

[12] An 1883 issue of *Le Livre Revue* announced the forthcoming publication of *La Muselée*, a "psychological novel" by Fénéon. It never appeared. Of the novels in three lines Luc Sante writes: "They are the poems and novels he never otherwise wrote … They might be considered Fénéon's *Human Comedy*" (viii).

etc.) changed into the more sequential order of the present collection.[3]

Another way of describing the newer plan of the collection is to note the following. Three essays placed in the middle were written in dialogue with… what is the appropriate designation in this context? Poets? Artists? Creators of difficult creations? In any case, writers who belong to the history of the anarchist Idea, but are rarely discussed in the company I have been keeping: Fénéon, Cage, Duncan. Rather than section these three pieces off in a section on literature or language, or, worse, publish them elsewhere, I opted to insert them into what would have otherwise been a sequence (a syllabus?) of essays where anti-political and nihilist themes deepened, in oblique directions, my explication of that Idea. As I noted, the shift from serial composition to a dialogical mode introduced into the essays a more linear, developmental structure, as if the effects of conversation had led me to more of an explicit *parti pris*. It seems important to me both to retain something of that structure for the reader and to interrupt it. Otherwise I run the risk of composing a book of theory about nihilist anarchy, something no one needs. If, in the interpolated essays, the engagement with these three figures (as well as that eternal outsider, d.a. levy) remains in the mode of introduction and allusion, I think it's because I suspected and continue to suspect that many of my readers either have no sense of them as writers or cannot connect what sense they have to anarchist practice—least of all an anarchist practice of reading or writing! Which is all to say that I wrote these pieces to some extent in a teaching mode. I am glad to have touched upon each of these writers here, if only because to name and honor them

[3] Even if many of those topics are addressed in passing throughout these essays, and some of the original approach is apparent, so I like to think, in its overall attitude. This is probably even more the case for another collection of essays, notes, and experiments I am now gathering, *How to Live Now or Never*, which will appear later this year.

in my own way constitutes an assertive response to a certain expectation of sloppy writing that characterizes the anarchist space.

If there is a note of patience in these essays about matters that drive people around me to great impatience, then I suppose that I have found it, among other places, in the form itself. I take it that an essay is primarily an exploration of ideas, and only secondarily an exposition. Expectation of getting to the point is replaced by invention of a wandering line in and as the essay. Mine are also informed by a kind of egoism that authorizes me, in its peculiarly empty way, to make whatever I am concerned with my own, as I impersonate the social outsider I often, but with no real certainty, feel myself to be. So to the paradoxical formulation of confounding theses I now add this paradox of form, that the sociable genre of the essay can be deployed so antagonistically at times. In saying so I am respectfully acknowledging those that inspired me to write essays, reassuring all those who think there is something fake at work here that they are indeed correct, and, hopefully, amusing everyone else.

The title's punctuation

Bill Haver used to say that to think the most important questions one simultaneously requires a infinite patience and infinite impatience. In the coincidence between some friends' will to destruction and the brevity of most attention spans I sense the infinity of impatience. Omniprevalent rushing to action, conclusions, or whatever is next in the feed does make one feel that patience has never been less possible. But that is just a feeling, something like a premonition, not much more; the present situation is full of dreadful affective indices. Here some minimal resistance, some uncanny intuition, informs me that a strangely infinite patience may still be coupled with our

in their painting a marvelous combination of naturalist and artificial aesthetics. Their colored points were applied on the basis of new scientific theories of vision, allowing a reinterpretation of the gaze's operation in everyday life. On the other hand, or rather, from other angles, the same canvases could not but overemphasize the fact that paint has been thusly deployed. Fénéon's brief novels, similarly, are snapshots or miniatures that show us quotidian scenes, but also show us how they show them. In giving the *faits-divers* a new style, Fénéon proved that their initial, supposed non-style indeed was one, however poor. In this sense the news, like the novel, becomes a matter of taste and an object of criticism. F. F.'s style, in being more artificial and affected, was, at the same time, more natural, more exact.

> Scratching himself with a revolver with an overly sensitive trigger, M. Édouard B. removed the tip of his nose in the Vivienne precinct house.
>
> Through a blunder, M. Vossel, an employee of the Wassy precinct, killed with a rifle shot M. Champenois, a farmer.
>
> A hanged man, there two months, has been found in the Estérel mountains. Fierce birds had completely disfigured him with their beaks.
>
> In Le Havre, a sailor, Scouranec, threw himself under a locomotive. His intestines were gathered up in a cloth.

5. Emergency Novels

But these micro-narratives are obviously also *emergency* novels. What I have called brevity, understood as compression,

F. composed *are* cryptograms: concrete images that suggest an abstract idea or purified emotion without ever naming or indicating it directly. The image, then, as the raw material; symbolic intensity coalesces through a scrupulous prose haiku that documents it.

> Scheid, of Dunkirk, fired three times
> at his wife. Since he missed every shot,
> he decided to aim at his mother-in-
> law, and connected.
>
> Finding his daughter, 19,
> insufficiently austere, Jallat,
> watchmaker of Saint-Étienne, killed
> her. It is true that he has 11 children
> left.
>
> It is true that the mayor of Saint-
> Gervais, Gironde, has been
> suspended, but not that he has been
> sent to jail.

(reader = witness)

> Sand and only that was the only
> content of two suspect packages that
> yesterday morning alarmed Saint-
> Germain-en-Laye.
>
> After finding a suspect device on
> his doorstep, Friquet, a printer in
> Aubusson, filed a complaint against
> persons unknown.

In his art criticism Fénéon was especially interested in Neo-Impressionism (a term he himself coined). Here we might learn something about what we could call his *optic*. Seurat and the other pointillists studied the refraction of light. They deployed

familiar infinite impatience. And that is why the title is not *Impossible Patience*. Patience is sometimes difficult, but it is hardly impossible. What is impossible is the realization of the Idea of anarchy (which is why many friends, unwitting Platonists, call it the Beautiful Idea). What *is* impossible would be to fully assume, to truly embody, the resistant positions (quasi-positions, really, as they are anti-political rather than political) most often referred to in this book.

Consider them: the value of the term *nihilism*, to begin with, has always been that of an insult or accusation. By the time someone calls themselves a nihilist, there is already something of a responsive desperation about the gesture, and not just the straightforward act of naming implied in the common use of the phrase *taking a position*. Much the same should be said for *anarchist*, which will be not saved from irrelevance by retroactive conversion into a philosophy, addition of adjectives or prefixes, or assimilation-equation to some liberal or other radical tradition. If it is still fun (though certainly not useful) for me to play with such terms, it is because, first, people in the business of setting and enforcing theoretical and political agendas for others still call their adversaries anarchists and nihilists, and this makes me want to be such an adversary. Second, impressionable, angry, and desperate characters continue to be courageous or foolhardy enough to call themselves anarchists and nihilists, which makes one want to sidle up beside them with an inscrutably patient attention to their destructive inclinations. I share the ethics of those who feel it is impossible to reverse an insult, of those who prefer not to hide from what is said in it (that you are known to be an outcast), but prefer to take it on, to become the nightmares of a nightmarish society. In my own way, I share the ethics, and sometimes lack thereof, of those who know it is impossible to actualize the Beautiful Idea by any instrumental means, *including instrumental destruction*, and instead bear witness to that impossibility in their dismantlings here and there.

Which is where the intuition's mark, a comma, my comma, appears: as if in bearing witness to impossibility we learned to stage an impatience with impatience itself. As if to remind that this writing, because it forms part of our punctual actions, must remain fragmented, and that fragmentation, the emptiness that composes it, can only be read in punctuation and spacing.[4]

Patience, then…

Proximity's distance

Someone whose opinion I value described my approach to writing and publication as emerging from a concern with community. I think I know what he meant. Through these essays, there is an arc of increasing attention and interest with regard to the people, situations, and publications of the milieu. I have been writing with a fairly clear sense of address. For most who care, I write from far away; but I have been flirting with proximity, and it shows. That is what could be called my concern for community. So I accept the evaluation of my esteemed friend, but at the same time I must say that when I think of community in relation to the conversations that contributed to these essays, I mentally cross out the word. The reasons will become clear to attentive readers along the way. For now I'll say another word about the proximity that brought the book to its newer plan. For me increased proximity has made more conversations possible, but remains something other than belonging. This passage in a life of Spinoza resonates strongly with me:

> *… he cannot integrate into any milieu; he is not suited to any of them. Doubtless it is in democratic*

[4] So *the impossible, patience* of the title is also that of a reader who knows the difference between a commitment to the stuff of writing in its minutiae, and a pedantic obsession with details.

(banality)

> A suspicious man was found sleeping
> in a car at a stop sign. He was
> awakened and asked to move on.

The form suggests: this dull event at which you were likely not present does not merit an article. It barely even merits your attention. Most of us read through this information in the state William James, in his lectures on psychology, once dubbed

> *drowsy assent.*[10]

However, read with a bit more care, they are unexpectedly (because accidentally) humorous. In his compressed novels F. F. took full advantage of the marginality and triviality of the *faits-divers*. He was conscious of the way in which they draw our attention in a very different manner than an article under a big headline on page one, or editorials signed by famous, authoritative names. They operate through subtlety, through indirectness. Novels in three lines cannot compel our attention; they can only seduce us into attending.

4. In the Air

In historical terms F. F.'s style was an eccentric and microscopic fusion of two dominant literary movements in France at the time. The first, already going out of vogue, was naturalism. Its aim was a raw description of everyday life; a novel narrating dramatic events that one could, indeed, imagine as the subject matter of newspaper articles. The second movement was that of Fénéon's friends, such as Mallarmé: symbolism, with its way of making a cypher of every phrase. No journalistic possibilities there, so it would seem. But these brief tragicomedies F.

[10] "The Stream of Thought," in *Principles of Psychology*, 263.

one sort or another. There are also many accidents. Not, therefore, actions that can be interpreted in an overt and political sense as injustices or reactions to injustices; rather, the ordinary brutality of everyday life.

> Yesterday, in the streets of Paris,
> cars killed Mme Resche and M. P.
> Chaverrais and gravely wounded Mlle
> Fernande Tissèdre.
>
> During a pleasure outing in an ill-
> famed neighborhood of Toulon,
> Brigadier Houry, of the 3rd Colonial,
> was stabbed to death.

Political indices in the plot do not alter the effect:

> "If my candidate loses, I will
> kill myself," M. Bellavoine, of
> Fresquienne, Seine-Inférieure, had
> declared. He killed himself.
>
> Burning with electoral fervor, persons
> attending a speech by M. Lafferre in
> Agde got into a fight. Several were
> injured, one seriously.

Fénéon transformed the triviality of these anecdotes by sculpting them into compact novels. F. F. extracted the maximum effect from the transformation of the *nouvelles* as news into the *nouvelle* as novel. His tiny novels deviated conspicuously from the *faits-divers*: after all, its main function was filler. In the U.S. a comparable form is still used in small-town newspapers, or as police blotters:

> So-and-so's horse got out of the field
> and ran down Main Street.

> *and liberal milieus that he finds the best living conditions, or rather the best conditions for survival. But for him these milieus only guarantee that the malicious will not be able to poison or mutilate life, that they will not be able to separate it from the power of thinking that goes a little beyond the ends of the state, of a society, beyond any milieu in general. In every society, Spinoza will show, it is a matter of obeying and of nothing else. […] It is certain that the philosopher finds the most favorable conditions in the democratic state and in liberal circles. But he never confuses his purposes with those of a state, or with the aims of a milieu, since he solicits forces in thought that elide obedience as well as blame, and fashions the idea of a life beyond good and evil, a rigorous innocence… The philosopher can reside in various states, he can frequent various milieus, but he does so in the manner of a hermit, a shadow, a traveler or boarding house lodger…*

Proximity to the milieu, in contrast to belonging, could be compared to what has been called the Ibn ʿArabi effect. The Ibn ʿArabi effect has to do with a possible feedback of the experiences of those who have abandoned the radical milieu into that milieu. If an "anarchist" project were constituted, not to preserve itself and thus the milieu (usually in this order in terms of explicitly stated goals, and in reverse in terms of actual operations), but to seek out those who have quit the milieu, numerous salutary effects might eventually be felt: decreased influence of "young masculinity" (team-building homosociality as the default social bond), less disappointment and more curiosity about the stakes of quitting, maybe even encouragement towards such abandonment as a sign of intelligence. In both cases, in what can be learned by studying the hermit-philosopher's life and the (for now imagined) lessons of the Ibn

'Arabi effect, I underline the necessary distance that coincides with space and time to reflect. Approximation makes more conversations possible; distance and feedback allow them to proceed past the inevitable onset of redundancy.

But everything written here out of proximity and reflection on proximity is shadowed by another set of more private, solitary thoughts, no less written into the essays for being private or solitary. Such thoughts not only are private and solitary but concern privacy and solitude as such and are thus at odds with the politics discussed here—though not the ethics, or, alas, the aesthetics. And insofar as I now see how much I was concerned with such thoughts, I wonder why I signed A. de A., and can only tell myself that it was another impersonation, one more mask.

cated and indirect pathos, unfolding a new relation to everydayness.[9]

> After being autopsied, the
> unidentified bishop found yesterday
> on the main square in Aïn-el-Turk,
> Oran, was buried with ecclesiastical
> honors.
>
> An unknown person painted the walls
> of Pantin cemetery yellow; Dujardin
> wandered naked through Saint-Ouen-
> l'Aumône. Crazy people, apparently.

(urgency)

> No one hanged the young Russian
> Lise Joukovsky; she hanged herself,
> and the Rambouillet magistrates have
> allowed her to be buried.
>
> Perronet, of Nancy, had a close
> call. He was coming home. Having
> jumped out the window, his father,
> Arsène, came crashing down in front
> of him.

At first glance, the column seems to enumerate a banal series of banal anecdotes. The pivotal events of these novels are almost always murders, suicides, assaults, or transgressions of

[9] Briefly, "everyday life" and "everydayness" name a recent historical phenomenon combining ancient urban behavioral patterns and relatively new modes of sociality, recombined in the setting of capitalist exchange. I follow the Situationists in thinking that everyday life, once it appears, is already colonized. This colonization of life was dimly grasped, though very well explicated, by Heidegger in his phenomenologies of anxiety and boredom.

(Explosion of laughter).
Judge: You were seen speaking with
them behind a lamp-post!
Fénéon: Can you tell me, Your Honor,
where behind a lamp-post is?[8]

Here is a first clue concerning the style of the novels. Fénéon kept his composure, responding to the interrogation with impeccable witticisms. His responses reveal an almost impossibly well-calculated precision and humor. They also tell us something about F. F.'s aesthetics of existence; they are evidence of an utter commitment. Even in a situation where one could be sent to prison or put to death, one did not give up on the witty repartee, on holding one's own against a boorish interlocutor. Our novels are also marked by such a commitment; not, however, before the judge and prosecutor, but before the banality of everyday life and the boredom of work.

3. Brevity and Relation

So these novels are the writings of an anarchist dandy, done in the context of temporary work, and may be related to an aesthetic commitment that is, tendentially, an ethico-political commitment. At the same time they are *not* explicitly political texts. There are a few items concerning actions motivated by political beliefs, but even these seem to include ideological positions only incidentally. What is interesting here is rather how he transformed the received genre of the *faits-divers*. These items were already brief. The anonymous F. F. made them witty. In their newly significant brevity, they communicate a compli-

[8] Ibid., 289-290.

I Have Even Met Happy Nihilists

"I Have Even Met Happy Nihilists" is the result of multiple modifications of a review Kelly Fritsch invited me to write for the Canadian journal Upping the Anti. An edited version of the review appeared there in 2008. It was perhaps the first time that I wrote on nihilism. What I read there now is an acknowledgment that politically salvific leftist theory such as Critchley's, even as it proclaimed an allegiance with a certain anarchism, excluded most of what I was beginning to find so interesting in anarchist thought and practice. I also register a note of suspicion concerning growing attention to anarchism in the academy. In retrospect, it seems clear that anarchism was being invoked here, not by or for anarchists, but for a socialist or even Leninist Left in need of correction. I am glad that in some small way an anarchist spoke up to trouble the terms of that largely symbolic invocation. Thinking these matters through was enough to let me know I needed to wander off in another direction. The problem, of course, is to figure out how to undo the common flipside of this suspicion, the attitude of some anarchists that our "low theory" (as McKenzie Wark put it in his study of the Situationists) is something entirely sui generis*, and so is or ought to be our only point of reference… In any case, this review was the discovery of the anti-political, "impossible", perspective explored in this collection.*

1. The other kind of nihilist

Simon Critchley, a professor at the New School for Social Research, has written a brief book setting out a possible movement from ethics to politics, from commitment to resistance. *Infinitely Demanding* serves as an index of what is promising and what is a dead end in certain philosophical approaches to Left positions and to anarchism in ethics and politics. Rather than remaining at the level of political theory, Critchley seeks to connect his claims with the activities of protest movements. Here activists could find the rudiments of a common language and some concepts for theorizing their own activity. What those who never did, or no longer do, consider themselves activists make of it is another matter—especially if part of their reason for doing so is putting into question their relation to the Left. For the book is not without the defects of much, if not most theoretical work on ethics and politics: overly narrow theoretical and practical panoramas.

Infinitely Demanding opens by staging the problem of nihilism for ethics and politics: all beliefs or values increasingly seem meaningless and all actions appear equally worthless. A redefined ethics is presented as a way to overcome nihilism, theorized as a singular kind of commitment to a situation or cause that renovates or recreates the meaning of action, and politics appears as the actions resulting from that overcoming: resistance to… mostly to State power, it seems—a problem I will return to. In sum, Critchley proposes that the problem of nihilism is overcome, or at least more convincingly confronted, when ethics moves from being based on a moral tradition, code, or law, to the raw experience of ethical demand, and when politics abandons the project of the seizure of power in favor of an endless resistance.

Critchley begins with a programmatic introduction that presents the problem of nihilism. When he uses this term, he means it in roughly the sense Nietzsche used it in his

> cool and reserved, his mean, sharp face expressionless except for a brief smile that flashed his scorn once or twice at the court.[7]

She excerpts from the interrogation:

> *Judge Dayras*: You were the intimate friend of the German anarchist, Kampffmayer.
>
> *Fénéon*: The intimacy could not have been very great. I do not know a word of German and he does not speak French.
> (Laughter).
> *Judge*: Matha, under indictment for antimilitary propaganda, stopped at your house when he came to Paris.
>
> *Fénéon*: Perhaps he was short of money.
> *Judge*: When you were arrested, you were asked if you knew Matha. You said no!
> *Fénéon*: Yes, systematically. I was not used to being in handcuffs, and at that moment, I wanted to have time to think.
> *Judge*: It has been established that you surrounded yourself with Cohen and Ortiz.
> *Fénéon* (smiling): One can hardly be surrounded by two persons; you need at least three.

[7] Halperin, *Félix Féneon*, 289.

their convergence. There are a number of figures who could be retroactively described as having, as part of their *aesthetic* sensibility, radical political sympathies.[6]

> "To die like Joan of Arc!" cried
> Terbeaud from the top of a pyre made
> of his furniture. The firemen of Saint-
> Ouen stifled his ambition.
>
> **(startling)**
>
> Barcantier, of Le Kremlin, who had
> jumped in the river, tried in vain to
> throttle, aided by his Great Dane, the
> meddler who was dragging him out.
>
> Two Malakoff blacksmiths were rivals
> in love. Dupuis threw his hammer at
> Pierrot, who in turn tore up his face
> with a red-hot iron.

Now, an uncertainty: Fénéon may have been the one who deposited a bomb that detonated outside the Hôtel Foyot on April 4, 1894. Whether or not he was responsible, this *attentat* belonged to the violent political climate of that Paris: often enough, brutality against the poor resulted in the anonymous bombing of a bourgeois restaurant or aristocratic opera house. Fénéon may or may not have done this; he *was* tried for it. His biographer, Joan Halperin, summarizes contemporary accounts of his demeanor before the judge and prosecutor:

> His manner was icily correct, his voice

[6] The best known is probably Oscar Wilde. See, for example, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" and "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young." One might also note the coincidence of spectacular public trials in each of their biographies.

unpublished notebooks: the "uncanniest of all guests," etc. Predictably enough, then, Critchley assumes that no one would confess to nihilism. Either one is not a nihilist, or is, but will not confess to it. Such unconfessed nihilists are either passive ("focused on himself and his particular pleasures and projects for perfecting himself"[1]) or active ("various utopian, radical political, and even terrorist groups"). While the category of passive nihilist seems mostly to reflect a critique of unreflective individualism and consumerism, especially of the North American variety, the second is an unlikely hodgepodge of everything from Fourier's phalansteries (poor Fourier!) through Russian anarchists, Bolsheviks, Futurists, and Situationists, all the way to various '70s Left guerillas-cum-terrorists, and finally al-Qaeda, as their "quintessence." What they all share is "find[ing] everything meaningless, but instead of sitting back and contemplating, [they try] to destroy this world and bring another into being" (5). So here is the problem for Critchley: those who should be politically active, as he considers political action, are nihilists. For him, a way out of both of these forms of nihilism is to turn back beyond the hollowness of meaning that seemingly produces them, returning to the problem of motivation.

Critchley's uncontroversial assumption is that the social, political, and economic circumstances that currently hold sway (at least in North America) are demotivating. But there do exist conceptual tools to re-motivate unconfessed nihilists, especially in recent ethical theory. Those with a desire for justice, liberation, unbounded passion, or a radically different life might indeed feel close to a certain nihilism as State power continues to grow and capitalism seems ever more absolute and unsurpassable. A differently conceived ethics, however, can give rise to a politics of resistance that does not need or ex-

[1] *Infinitely Demanding*, Verso, 2007, p. 4. All other page references in parentheses.

pect to seize power or defeat capitalism—just to resist them from within. Or maybe that just is unwarranted; it is not trivial to state, as Critchley does, that one can be anti-capitalist and anti-State without ever hoping to succeed. He writes: "far from failure being a reason for dejection or disaffection, I think it should be viewed as the condition for courage in ethical action" (55).

I agree that one need not count on success to act. (At a deeper level, this implies the critical uncoupling of what is sayable in theory from what seems possible in practice, thus opening the theoretical imagination to the impossible—which is not to say, the utopian.) But before I go on to Critchley's treatment of ethics, I will pose two questions. First, why are "we" (who? Critchley uses the vague "we" quite a bit) in the business of motivating anybody? How can we know if we are even in a position to do so? How are we so sure that "they" are not already motivated—perhaps in ways that "we" do not recognize as political? Especially since, according to Critchley, both kinds of nihilism are emanations of a fundamentally religious solution to the problem of meaninglessness? When Critchley asks his readers "how might we fill the best with passionate intensity" (39), who exactly is he referring to? Those among "the best" who have fallen to nihilism? The best among the credulous rest? At the least, his background presuppositions about relations between intellectuals and masses should be made explicit. But, for me, the stakes are greater than that. The unstated and truly fascinating matter is that many are motivated without an explicit ethics. This is a key component of anarchism and seems absent from Critchley's theory. Second question: Is nihilism always and only a problem? I remain unconvinced that it is, if only because I have met even stranger creatures than the active and passive nihilists Critchley warns us away from. About the active nihilist, Critchley writes that he "finds everything meaningless, but instead of sitting back and contemplating, he tries to destroy this world and bring another into being"

was always reticent about publication; he often signed his articles "F. F." or with generic names such as *Hombre*. Unprolific, then, given to a certain anonymity, Fénéon was deliberate about when and where he wrote—and more importantly, *how*.

2. A Way of Life

Whatever he might have called himself, I find it useful to call him a dandy. I consider dandyism to have been a lived philosophy.[3] I mean the way of life of anyone who has developed a complete aesthetics of existence, as one might once have developed or accepted, in the ancient Hellenistic schools especially, an ethics of existence.

Dandyism, the modern form of Stoicism …[4]

His manner of speaking, the tone of his voice; his style of dress, the way he did or did not appear in certain places; the way he formed or cut off friendships, the nature of his love affairs: all of these expressed an overall aesthetics of existence.[5] How can this be related to the fact that, at least when he wrote the novels, Fénéon's political sympathies were with the anarchists? It was the familiar anarchism of the late nineteenth century, with its pragmatically materialist view of history, science, and progress, its visceral anti-clericalism and anti-patriotism, and its vital infusion of egoism. This last aspect is perhaps how the dandies were able to make common cause: an emphasis on the individual and his or her self-presentation answered to both ethical and aesthetic sensibilities, offering the promise of

[3] I mean this only with respect to Fénéon's time. I have no idea what it would mean to be, or even claim to be, a dandy today.

[4] Michel Butor, *Histoire extraordinaire*, 82.

[5] These remarks echo accounts given by Fénéon's biographer, Joan Ungersma Halperin, and suggestions made by Luc Sante in his excellent introduction to *Novels in Three Lines*.

reports and town gossip into the 1,220 novels that have survived. Each one is a report assembled from a minimum of information. Each is also carefully composed as a minute novel. It is as though Fénéon interpreted the column's title, *nouvelles en trois lignes*, in both of its possible senses: "the news in three lines" and "novellas in three lines."

> After climbing to the attic, breaking through the ceiling, and invading the premises, thieves took 800 francs from M. Gourdé, of Montainville.
>
> Five hundred cigars and 250 flasks of wine: booty netted by burglars who visited the villa at Le Vésinet, of the soprano Catherine Flachat.

(virtuosity)

> "I could have done worse!" exultantly cried the murderer Lebret, sentenced at Rouen to hard labor for life.
>
> Schoolboys in Vibraye, Sarthe, attempted to circumsize a child. He was rescued, although dangerously lacerated.
>
> There were 12,000 francs in the safe of the rectory at Montmort, Marne. Burglars took it.

In these novels, Fénéon's prose balances painstaking precision and dry wit. This was also the style of his art criticism and of the pieces he published in anarchist newspapers.[2] He

[2] The novels, along with all of his other writings (including anonymous pieces of uncertain authorship) are gathered in the two volumes of *Oeuvres plus que complètes*.

(5). If such a nihilist thinks this new world will be more meaningful, he is still too credulous! There are among us passionate people, intelligent people, people capable of acting in a political sphere and of subtracting themselves from it as well—and they confess to nihilism. They do not need to be motivated by anyone; and they often consider themselves to be more sober than the rest of us.

I realize that I have ended up with something other than a critique here. Since, as I am about to explain, Critchley's ethics has to do with a raw experience, I offered mine, insofar as I have met individuals who contradict or exceed his schema: confessed nihilists, to be precise.

2. Ethics as micro-politics

However it manifests, nihilism undermines beliefs and values that have traditionally composed morality. Critchley seeks to overcome this undermining, provocatively suggesting: "the question of the metaphysical ground or basis of ethical obligation should simply be disregarded … Instead, the focus should be on the radicality of the human demand that faces us, a demand that requires phenomenology and not metaphysics" (55). That is, the emphasis must shift (and after nihilism it cannot but shift) from deducing the foundation of ethics to a phenomenology of ethical experience. What Critchley calls a "demand" is, he argues, impervious to nihilism. It is therefore unsurprising that, although Alain Badiou, Knud Ejler Løgstrop, and Jacques Lacan are all summoned as interlocutors in the discussion of ethical experience and the ethical subject, it is Emmanuel Levinas who serves as the main point of reference. Levinas, in works such as *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974), claimed that ethics has priority over metaphysics or ontology as "first philosophy" and that the first fact of

ethics is the face of the Other. One's experience of the Other is irreducible and primary, preceding even self-knowledge. One's encounter with the Other is the beginning of experience as such and thus makes all experience, all subjectivity, part of ethics.

One interesting aspect of Critchley's reading of Levinas is his claim that the nature of ethics is the same for secularists and for theists. A formula: "I experience a radical demand and try to shape my subjectivity in relation to it" (55). If the problem of grounding or justifying ethical theories is set aside in favor of a phenomenology of ethical experience, any sort of ethical experience that brings about the radical demand is good enough: the face of God, of my lover, of the strange neighbor, of the hungry or tortured other. This gesture is fully in line with Levinas' philosophy, and I find it compelling to some extent; my principal objection is that the categories of secularist and theist invoked here do not exhaustively describe all possible forms of religious and (for lack of a better word) non-religious experience. Could it be that Levinas and Critchley are identifying some basic structure that is, if not hard-wired into the history of "European" or "Western" forms of subjectivation, especially insofar as they reflect monotheisms, at least massively available to the inheritors of those traditions? If so, what about everybody else, here and elsewhere? Do animists or polytheists hear the demand? And what of the poor Buddhists that, in one of his most irritating gestures, Critchley mentions only in repeating the infamous Nietzschean quasi-metaphor that equates Buddhism with passivity and nihilism? How, in short, do those of us who do experience ethics as the cleavage in ourselves relate to all of those who have no self to be cleaved—or have too many for it to matter? Critchley does not address this question. He is rather more concerned to discuss how this cleavage or split in the self need not amount to endless guilt and self-torture. He does this through a discussion of sublimation and humor that incorporates psychoanalytic concepts into his

1. Tiny Novels

You are about to read five novels.

> Just married, the Boulches of Lambézellec, Finistère, were already so drunk it was necessary to lock them up within the hour.
>
> Countering the prosecution in court at Saint-Étienne, Crozet, a.k.a. Aramis, presumed prolific thief, met all questions with silence.

(brevity)

> Some business involving streetlights, taken the wrong way by the court at Nancy, earned a month in prison for the agitator Diller.
>
> Marie Boulanger, a gilder, is in Cochin recovering from a knife wound given to her by Juliette Duveaux. The young women were mutually envious.
>
> A corpse floated downstream. A sailor fished it out at Bolougne. No identification; a pearl grey suit; about 65 years old.[1]

Yes, novels; brief novels, novels in three lines. They were published anonymously in the form of a *faits-divers* column in the Parisian newspaper *Le Matin*. The date was 1906. Félix Fénéon took a temporary job working at this liberal newspaper, with a circulation around half a million, translating wire

[1] All translations by Luc Sante, from *Novels in Three Lines*.

Fénéon's Novels

"Fénéon's Novels" was extemporaneously created at the Renewing the Anarchist Tradition conference in 2007. I visited this gathering four or five times over the years and made some good friends there. Among other things, extemporaneously created here means that the excerpts from Fénéon cited were 1) intended to familiarize listeners with material none of them had read 2) chosen more or less at random—which random order was preserved in the written form and informed its transformation into the present piece. I later created this more writerly version with helpful feedback from Joshua Beckman. It was accepted (by one editor) and then rejected (by the rest) for a book on contemporary political movements, which seems appropriate; it both is and is not about contemporary political movements. It addresses some of the thinking on language discussed more broadly in "To Acid-Words" by focusing on a specific kind of writing that might easily be overlooked, thus staging the question of what to do with all of the writing that we don't want to consider writing. Relatedly, here I say some things about ethics from a somewhat different perspective than the preceding essays: ethics as a way of attending. (A similar view is discussed in a piece not included here, "Anarchist Meditations".)

> *Meanwhile the newspapers took over the task of recounting the grey, unheroic details of everyday crime and punishment.*
> — Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

ethics in a bid to remove them from the accusation of vestigial religiosity often leveled at Levinas and his followers. This is all interesting but seems rather secondary given the magnitude of the problems he has raised (so far: nihilism and the putative universality of ethical experience).

Now, returning to the idea that any experience of ethical demand is good enough: is that so? Some of these faces of the Other are intimate, others distant; some real, others imaginary. How to reconcile them all in a single phenomenology? It is not hard to criticize Levinasian ethics for its crypto-religious leanings: it seems the only way to get around the imperative of the moral law was to divide the self, rending it insofar as it was possessed by the Other. A mutually ethical relation would then amount to mutual possession. Obviously many anarchists, especially the egoists, would have no interest in such claims. They might rather hazard a version of what I heard a Korean anarchist say quite charmingly some years ago: "Some days I am ethical … some days I am not." Though I do not think this means the idea of a raw experience of ethical demand is useless, I do think it shows its purported universality is a failure. (And this perhaps returns us to a more modest, pre-Kantian ethics, something like the moral sentiments of Hume or Smith, though without their claimed relation to our animal or human nature.) In politics, the problem of nihilism is perhaps not as immediately discernible as it is in ethics. As Critchley describes it, one facet is strategic and has to do with identifying politically effective actions that are in line with the ethical demands one experiences. But prior to that is the question of motivation: Critchley seeks to "provide an ethical orientation" that might support "a remotivation of politics or political action" (90). For him, political action "does not flow from the cunning of reason, some materialist or idealist philosophy of history, or socio-economic determinism, but rather from … a 'metapolitical' moment of ethical experience." This idea of a politics motivated by a morality without sanction is, if not already anarchist

in most senses of the word, compelling to many anarchists.[2] For Critchley this ethical component both motivates political action and maintains it as democratic, egalitarian, or at least non-coercive. I would like to underline that this is a different account of motivation than the passage from ethics to politics as usually conceived, because the ethics at stake is situational: theorists or philosophers can recommend actions, motivating people to act, but ethics has no sanction.

For that reason especially, it might seem promising that Critchley attempts to connect his argument with existing movements. "The ethical energy for the remotivation for politics and democracy can be found in those plural, dispersed, and situated anti-authoritarian groups that attempt to articulate the possibility of … 'true democracy'" (90). I should note, however, that he does not seem to have (or at least never refers to) any direct experience of these movements.[3] When he presents what he calls "anarchic meta-politics" as a basis for and extension of anarchist theory and practice, it's safe to say that he is not especially familiar with either. With respect to anarchism, Critchley is a combination of a dreamer and a friendly observer. Overwhelmingly, he seems to situate himself primarily in some sort of philosophical Left (that is probably the book's "we") that needs to be steered to anarchism while holding on to a certain young Marx. It

[2] Critchley approvingly cites David Graeber's formula: "Marxism has tended to be a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy. Anarchism has tended to be an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice" (125). What is telling concerning Critchley's attraction to anarchism is that he usually conceives of ethical discourse as a theory or a philosophy (emerging from an experience, granted) rather than an ethos or even *habitus*, a way of life first and discourse second, as Graeber's ethnologically inflected writings do.

[3] They mostly appear in *Infinitely Demanding* as filtered through two short texts by David Graeber (*Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* and the article "The New Anarchists") and a work on indigenous politics in Mexico and Australia by Courtney Jung.

I intuit two things here: that pluralism seems to continually reveal its relativist core more and more often, and that the revelation of the relativist core will make it increasingly easier for the nihilist position to be stated, with all of its disruptive effects. Conversely, as I have suggested, *merely stating the nihilist position coherently has effects*. I propose that those interested make it their business to *deploy the triplicity*. To which I will immediately add: *there will be stupid and parodic versions of this moment. For some of us this moment will be lived entirely as parody and stupidity*. But there will also be, for some, an opportunity to refine what *our* anarchism has always meant, not as the direction history or society is going in, not as the truth of a tradition, or as an ideal of any sort, but as that which breaks from such orientations in the most absolute sense: the negating prefixes *a-*, *an-*, *anti-*… anti-politics as a provisional orientation, branching out into countless refusals.[13] Our ethics emerges and gives itself to thought only where breaks and refusals clear a sufficient space. We know almost nothing about such spaces, so our ethics might also be defined as the provisional *disorientation* with which we approach our ways of living, the interminable and necessary *skepticism* that characterizes our thinking's motion.

[13] Speaking for myself, I underestimated the negative in the political sphere, the power of negativity (the attitude towards world, society, spectacle, whatever sets itself up as the All). My temperament led me to emphasize ethical questions about how to live a life of joy, about the places of affirmation (individualism/egoism, the aesthetic sensibility that never lies). I do think one can affirm one's own life, affirm the nothing in it, so to speak, as one resists. Until I realized this, I drifted near this space, but never really knew it. I remained confused about the negative, about the effectiveness of the prefixes *a-*, *an-*, *anti-* …

increasingly unimaginative discussions, as if to systematically shut down the possibility of such questioning?

What these four consequences add up to is perhaps something on the order of a paradigm shift that some of us are perhaps dimly beginning to perceive. Or perhaps it is much bigger and more terrifying than a paradigm shift could ever be. Rousselle overestimates the importance and centrality of post-anarchism to anarchist theory (and, needless to say, various milieus), and his claim that his theorizing after post-anarchism consolidates the shift from pluralist/relativist post-anarchism, with its reformist and radical liberal tendencies, and a fully nihilist theory expressing the latent destructive content of anarchism, is misplaced. But increasing emphasis on nihilist ideas, and the increasing prevalence of what could be called nihilist measures, is a condition that involves us all to some degree. And we have tried to think it through and respond. The call for an end to government instead of a better, more democratic, more egalitarian form of government is ancient. The call for the abolition of work instead of just, fair, or dignified work is decades old, at least. How many of us no longer criticize competition so as to contrast it with cooperation, but because the victory it offers is laughably meaningless? How many of us have more or less explicitly shifted from advocating a plurality of genders to pondering the conditions for the abolition of gender as such? What to make of the increasing opposition to programmatism[12] and demands in moments of confrontation and occupation?

[12] A useful term I borrow from *Théorie Communiste*. As they define it: "a theory and practice of class struggle in which the proletariat finds, in its drive toward liberation, the fundamental elements of a future social organisation which become the programme to be realised. This revolution is thus the affirmation of the proletariat, whether as a dictatorship of the proletariat, workers' councils, the liberation of work, a period of transition, the withering of the state, generalised self-management, or a 'society of associated producers'." "Much Ado About Nothing," in *Endnotes* 1, 155.

is not surprising that citations of authors closer to Marxism than anarchism (Ernesto Laclau, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Miguel Abensour) far outnumber references to anarchist texts or movements in *Infinitely Demanding*. I am not mentioning any of this to maintain some sort of purity or specialization of anarchist thought and practice, but rather to underline to what extent it is an imagined and imaginary anarchism that is under discussion here, whether under that name or something like "anarchic meta-politics" or "neo-anarchism."

At the same time, Critchley frames his argument as explicitly anti-Leninist (and makes, both in the introduction and the appendix (5-6, 146), the claim that contemporary Islamic terrorism is neo-Leninist). "Politics," he writes, "is praxis in a situation that articulates an interstitial distance from the state and allows for the emergence of new political subjects who exert a universal claim" (92). That, and emphatically not the attempted or successful seizure of state power. But here there is an enormous problem: if politics is so defined, what shall we call the activities of States? It makes more sense to me to either describe both State activities and the actions of movements as politics, or—and this is by far the more compelling, if underexplored, option: to describe State activities and some of their contestation as politics, and the remainder of what anarchists (and some others) do, outside of movements, as micro- and especially anti-politics. If we accept this second description, then the version of ethics we get is far more fragile: it is neither universally reliable as moral law or raw experience, nor is its motivation of a passage to politics a predictable or desirable effect.

For his part, Critchley maintains that for the foreseeable future, the presence of states is inevitable. What ethically motivated subjects do, then, is confront State power, creating and acting within "interstices." Critchley illustrates the opening up of interstices with a strange quote from Levinas: "Anarchy

… cannot be sovereign. It can only disturb, albeit in a radical way, the State, prompting isolated moments of negation without any affirmation. The State, then, cannot set itself up as a Whole" (cited in *Infinitely Demanding*, 122). I wonder if Critchley has fully digested what Levinas is suggesting here concerning negation. It also bears underlining that this is a passage, as Levinas made clear (and as Critchley repeats) about *philosophical* anarchy, and therefore as relevant to the other, confessed, nihilism I have gestured towards as much as to any supposed anarchism or neo-anarchism. Critchley's interpretation of this philosophy in practical terms amounts to, first, underlining to what extent its demand translates to a thoroughly anti-authoritarian politics ("anarchy is the creation of interstitial distance within the state, the continual questioning from below of any attempt to establish order from above" (122-123)). For him, this is the overall ethical force of anarchism. Secondly, Critchley maintains that "the great virtue of contemporary anarchism is its spectacular, creative, and imaginative disturbance of the state" (123). While I find this philosophical affirmation of protest movements somewhat interesting, I am also deeply troubled at the way it makes confrontation with State power the defining or at least most meaningful moment of anarchist practice. This is to miss out on countless sorts of collective activities, sometimes called communities, not to mention more or less secret individual pursuits. I am referring again to the micro- and anti-political, which, though they are understandably off the radar of an interested outsider, compose for many of us the most significant aspect of anarchy as we are able to live it. This overemphasis on the State is my third major problem with *Infinitely Demanding*.

a colossal gap, between the implosion-moment of societies like ours and the eternal meaninglessness of value claims and moral codes. Anti-politics might be said only to address the former, while ethical nihilism ultimately invokes the latter. But anti-politics may also reveal ethical nihilism; our willful action may accelerate the ex- or implosion of the world to reveal more of the meaninglessness it has been designed to conceal.

The fourth consequence is that *nihilism is also a condition.* It is not merely those who make it their business to think and act in the world that are living with nihilism. The force of ethical nihilism is not so much in being a position one advocates as in its undermining of others' claims to certainty. If we are able to do this sometimes it is because there are many others who, in a rapidly decomposing society, more or less consciously grasp the hollowness in every code of action. Take this passage from Heidegger as an illustration:

> The realm for the essence and event of nihilism is metaphysics itself, always assuming that by "metaphysics" we are not thinking of a doctrine or only of a specialized discipline of philosophy but of the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety … Metaphysics is the space of history in which it becomes destiny for the supersensory world, ideas, God, moral law, the authority of reason, progress, the happiness of the greatest number, culture, and civilization to forfeit their constructive power and to become void.[11]

Dare I add here that something of this condition was also gestured toward in a few precious texts on postmodernism, texts which raised tremendous questions about their present, and by extension ours, only to be buried in an avalanche of

[11] "Nietzsche's word: God is Dead," in *Off the Beaten Track*, 165.

nihilist position into any one practice or set of practices. Destructive practices, partial or absolute, do not follow mechanically from negation. Destruction is not the practical application of a negative theory. I am certainly not saying that destruction is not worthwhile as a practice or set of practices; but I am saying that nihilists by definition reject the overidentification of any practice with their negation of existing moralities and normative approaches to ethics. It is my sense that, once the nihilist position exists as something other than a caricature, the other positions will be increasingly undermined from within and without.

The third consequence is that *ethical nihilism is more than a theory.* It is a way of living and thinking, a form-of-life in which the two are not separate. That Rousselle discusses it only as a theory leaves it to the rest of us to elaborate what else it is, what it looks like, as some say, or how it is practiced. It is my sense that he was able to write this book because of events and situations in his life, in the milieu, in other places. So when I invoke the practical aspect of nihilism, having already said that it cannot be reduced to any practice or set of practices, I mean two things. First, that I mean to underline the unusual tone of all the practices of those that accept some version of the perspective that there is no Outside (to capitalism, civilization, or the existent), or that are profoundly skeptical about any proposed measures to get Outside. Second, that to speak of practices related to ethical nihilism continues to make it seem like a theory that endorses or suggests a course of action, while its interest is precisely that it may not do so. Monsieur Dupont's phrase Do Nothing is relevant here: "Do Nothing… was and remains a provocation. […] Do Nothing is an immediate reflection of Do Something and its moral apparatus."[10] From weird practices to doing nothing: this is precisely the enigmatic space where anti-politics converges with ethics. Yes, there is a gap, perhaps

[10] *Nihilist Communism*, 198.

3. Hangovers of the Left

Critchley concludes with a telling appendix entitled "Crypto-Schmittianism—the Logic of the Political in Bush's America." It offers a schematic conjunctural analysis of the U.S. state and its politics, emphasizing, as the title suggests, the supposed influence of the writings of the Nazi-affiliated political theorist Carl Schmitt on the Bush administration. How did they get re-elected in 2004? "I think part of the story is that certain people in the Bush administration have got a clear, robust, and powerful understanding of the nature of the political. They have read their Machiavelli, their Hobbes, their Leo Strauss and misread their Nietzsche" (133). Meanwhile the Democrats are "too decent, too gentlemanly or gentlewomanly. They are too nice […] It seems to me that they don't understand a damn thing about the political" (143). Critchley suggests they study Carl Schmitt and Gramsci. The argument as to the bookishness of the Bush Republicans goes so far as to enter into a discussion of whether George W. Bush is stupid (if you care: he isn't (138); he seems to have read a book and is apparently capable of presenting "theses" (141)). From there, Critchley returns to the main argument of the book, distinguishing between three political alternatives available in the current conjuncture. They are "military neo-liberalism," "neo-Leninism" (our old friends the active nihilists) and the "neo-anarchism" he recommends.

Without once more invoking the prefix "neo-", I might point out that, if we stick to the terms of this schema, there is a position missing here. These alternatives are not really alternatives: the neoliberals and neo-Leninists, whoever they are, will never be convinced by reading a book like Critchley's. The neo-anarchists might find in it a new language for their ethico-political motivation. And those who are inexplicably motivated, within and outside politics? They are the incredulous: confessed nihilists.

Reading the appendix I could not help but feel that I was learning entirely too much about Critchley's true politics and watching him be dragged back into the perhaps well-intentioned but ultimately self-referential Leftism of so many Continental philosophers—or university professors, for that matter. I was somewhat interested in the image I got from the last chapter, a vision of an ethically inclined phenomenologist charting out a turn to a politics of resistance that had some chances of building a bridge with existing movements and non-academic theorizing. It might have helped make some trouble, at least. The appendix botched that image. I will conclude by explaining how and why it matters.

The first aspect of the problem is Critchley's uncritical identification with Democrats or Left electoral parties. Critchley discusses the U.S. Democrats and what they should do, and whether "we" should support them (143-145). For many of us this is completely irrelevant to the theme of the contestation or evasion of State power, and especially to what we think of as politics and its alternatives. Second aspect: the assumption that the appearance of recognizable philosophical signifiers in relation to the Bush administration signals that it can be understood by study of the texts involved. "They have read …" and so "they understand the nature of the political." This is preposterous. It is the intellectualist fantasy of a professor. Supposing there is a nature of the political, there is no golden road, no special texts that one must read, to understand it. The third aspect of the problem is a graver version of the second: Critchley devotes space to claiming that "Bush thinks" as though this mattered. What all of this amounts to is the familiar phenomenon of an intellectual who simply cannot let go of the mirage of electoral politics and political figureheads, never realizing to what extent being intellectually and emotionally involved in their activities amounts to anything but resistance.

Despite two awkward references to the "Situationism of Guy Debord" (5, 135) it never seems to occur to Critchley that

advocate a renewal of society, an improvement of government and management (as self-government, self-management), suggesting pluralist approaches — are likely to refuse to discuss or make explicit the universalist core of their thought. Others might advocate the same practices, while privately sensing or even admitting the hollowness of the values they defend. (One disingenuous result of these private/public conflicts is the unrestrained impulse to act no matter what, as though action can never be damaging or compromised, coupled with claims that it is all an experiment, that we are learning as we go, and so on.) This offers a new perspective on the emergence and significance of second-wave anarchy[9] generally, including post-Left anarchy, green/anti-civilization anarchy, and, I suppose, post-anarchism as well, all of which might now be seen as attempts to analyze and reveal these contradictions, to make explicit the ways in which anarchist discourse was always at war with itself.

The second consequence complements the first: another set of anarchists *confuses ethical pluralism with ethical nihilism.* Here *merely stating the ethical nihilist position coherently has effects.* In this respect I think of those who might have overcome the liberal value-set in politics, advocating destruction of the existent, but continue to drift back to pluralist/relativist perspectives in everyday life and problem-solving due to a lack of imagination. This probably results from unconsciously positing a pluralist society as what comes after a destructive moment, while not consciously framing destructive action as having any particular goal beyond destruction of the existent. I should add here that it would be hasty to collapse the ethical

[9] For those not familiar with it, this term was introduced by John Moore to refer to anarchist theory and practice after the Situationist International. It might be considered telling that Moore offered the term in a review of a foundational post-anarchist book by Todd May. The review was originally published in *Anarchist Studies*, but I know it from a zine called *Second Wave Anarchy.*

us as lessons—logical lessons about what anarchy means. Its core is the negation.

4

Such logical lessons are useful, arguably necessary, if we want to discard hope at this juncture and think with more sobriety. Most of the thinking from this perspective remains to be done. It concerns the conjunctions and disjunctions between several senses of nihilism. First, there are those most familiar in the milieu as positions: nihilist anarchy and nihilist communism. Second, there is nihilism as a theoretical concern in other writers, from Jacobi to Baudrillard. Lastly, there is the diagnostic sense of nihilism inherited from Nietzsche. Articulating these with the ethical nihilism Rousselle discovers/invents at the core of anarchism will be a complicated task, so I will limit myself here to an enumeration of provisional consequences stemming from what I have written so far. I offer these consequences as a relay from *After Post-Anarchism's* provocations to the thinking that remains to be done: to make it possible, to prepare it as best I know how. The first two consequences suggest how we might deploy the triplicity to understand and critique contemporary anarchist approaches. The latter two concern the broader relevance and context for ethical nihilism, setting out from the anarchist context.

The first consequence is that it is now clear that *many contemporary anarchists confusedly combine ethical universalism with ethical pluralism; and ethical universalism with ethical nihilism.* In a society like ours, one whose ideal is supposedly liberal democracy, we should expect pluralist language to be the most likely one in which radicals will offer their analysis and proposals. Community organizing, consciousness-raising, and so on, have obvious links to liberalism and are at best its radical forms. As a result, moralistic types — those who publically

the Spectacle is more than image-based propaganda. It is a social relation, or lack of relation, really, that makes it possible to speculate, for example, about the reading lists of cabinet members, the plans of huge and institutionalized electoral parties, and even the intelligence or lack thereof of figureheads as though it mattered for the politics of resistance. All the while, engaging in such speculation, we miss the fact that we have been duped into continuing to think of ourselves as belonging on the same purported Left-Right continuum as huge electoral parties, satisfied that we are farther to the Left than the Democrats. This is, it seems to me, the limit of Critchley's political thought. It is friendly to what he conceives as anarchism, or at least to anti-authoritarian protest movements; but it cannot shake its identification with a Left that continues to define the limits of action in terms of engagement with the State and forbids stepping beyond them—beyond politics. Therefore the anarchism he recommends is reactive. Yes, theoretically inclined activists might learn something about how they are perceived and how they might explain themselves from Critchley's writing, but there is little here in the way of a broader social or strategic imagination with which they might chart out future actions. And as for the rest of us—my friends the nihilists; those of us, too, who are something other than activists—what remains are curious questions. How do we explain to each other what motivates us, if it is indeed so intimate (which is not necessarily to say private, or personal)? It's fair to say that some of what Critchley suggests about raw ethical experience, about an ethics without sanction, is relevant here. Is there a way to reject the language of politics and/or activism in favor of micropolitics or anti-politics, so far as we are capable of defining these terms, and the activities and structures they express, other than reactively?

Appendix: I Have Even Met Happy Nihilists, Tractatus Version [Excerpts]

1. Someone writes a book.
1.1 Someone else publishes it.
1.2 In it you find a story of the world.
1.2.1 The story comes ever so close to describing, if not the life you live, something like the life you suppose others live.
1.2.2 Activists, for example.
1.2.2.1 Or those who compose movements.
1.2.2.2 At least those who say they do.
1.2.2.3 And anarchists, maybe, since there is also supposed to be something called anarchism, which is said to overlap with activism or movements.
1.3 But the book is strange.
1.3.1 It tells a story about anarchy, gestures to it somehow, but sideways.
1.3.2 You might wonder what that has to do with your life, your thoughts.

[…]
6. The book is both more and less than what it seemed to be at first.
6.1 Less: the habits of writers run deep, and there is a way such habits have of containing the new even as they strive to name it.
6.2 More: in all the flag-waving there might be an interstice.
6.3 A place and a time, however contingent, however passing, where and when to say: here some others and I lived.
6.3.1 Because we lived, sometimes we were ethical.
6.3.2 And almost no one noticed or understood.

the case, the nihilist position will be known in that it exposes the differend between itself and the others, and *between the others and themselves.*

This is consistent with the basic formulation of nihilism as a negative ethics. Actions taken in its name are always provisional: to reiterate from *Theory of Bloom*, all we have and all we know is "the interplay of forms-of-life" and "the protocols of experimentation that guide them." No one knows what the world would be like if it were populated with nihilists alone! Following the previously cited sentence on the negativity at the core of the tradition, Rousselle cites one of his sources, the moral philosopher J.L. Mackie:

> [W]hat I have called moral scepticism is a negative doctrine, not a positive one: it says what there isn't, not what there is. It says that there do not exist entities or relations of a certain kind, objective values or requirements, which many people have believed to exist. If [this] position is to be at all plausible, [it] must give some account of how other people have fallen into what [it] regards as an error, and this account will have to include some positive suggestions about how values fail to be objective, about what has been mistaken for, or has led to false beliefs about, objective values. But this will be a development of [the] theory, not its core: its core is the negation. (99)

In my language, the negation corresponds to ethics as a way of life; the account of error, to what I call a counter-rhetoric. I praise Rousselle, then, because he contributed to a defense of what is negative in anarchism, while also hinting at a defense of negativity as such. He makes space for us to read passages such as the one by Mackie, above, creatively, offering them to

Rousselle suggests that, although most post-anarchists thought they were improving upon anarchism or developing its intuitions, they were in fact rendering it more docile, because more akin to liberal ideals; he, on the other hand, has revealed its nihilist core, its true and original inclination to anarchy. The problem now becomes: when anarchists disavow this nihilist core, opting for some version of relativism (or universalism!), how do we answer them? For the same reasons that I do not take Kropotkin's or Bakunin's manifest ideas as my guides, I do not take what analysis might reveal as their latent content as my guide. And if I do not find this kind of argumentation compelling, why would I use it on another? This is where Rousselle's intellectualist assumptions undercut the force of his claims. I do think, however, that the ethical nihilist position is at the core of most anarchist discourse and practice, as its latent content. That is, I think he is basically right*, not specifically about so-called classical anarchism, but, proximately and for the most part, about anarchists.* Rousselle's psychoanalytically inspired method of reading texts should be transformed into a rhetoric, or rather a counter-rhetoric, that can intervene in the present more directly. What he does with old texts, others might be able to do with people, groups, and contemporary texts. But how and when to use this counter-rhetoric? The least I can say is that I am not in the business of convincing anyone about what they really think. I may well keep my analysis to myself, or state it in resignation of being misunderstood; or I may use it to attack. Whatever

example, explicitly stated what Rousselle claims can only be grasped as a latent content (i.e. what appears only when explicit statements are analyzed). The best one can say about Rousselle's analysis in this regard is that it destabilizes what many consider to be the center and the margins of the anarchist tradition, or canon. But it does leave one wondering why he discusses Kropotkin at such length instead of Stirner or Novatore, for example, who are referenced only in passing. Is there something at stake for him in emphasizing ethical nihilism as a latent content as opposed to a manifest one?

Its Core is the Negation

This is the first in a trilogy of essays on approaches to nihilism, the other two being "History as Decomposition" and "Green Nihilism or Cosmic Pessimism." It is focused on Duane Rouselle's After Post-Anarchism*, a book that caused me no small amount of frustration. I was pleased to discover something in it worth sharing with many who I knew would never make it through its pages, so I tried to write it out for them in* Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, where it was published in 2013. It was also, then, a gift to that publication, which I recall reading with interest around 1991-1992, and where I had published some playful essays in more recent years. In this essay, the feeling of there being something new to say took a hybrid form, combining a "report on knowledge" with a personal philosophical narrative. This is also the place to remark that, in the same vein as Duane's book, the reading (and re-reading) of the writings of Monsieur and Frère Dupont have been for me, as for a few others, the source of an uncanny clarity; they receive brief explicit mention here, but their salutary influence should be clear.*

1

I have always considered my inclination to anarchy to be irreducible to a politics. Anarchist commitments run deeper. They are more intimate, concerning supposedly personal or private matters; but they also overflow the instrumental realm of getting things done. Over time, I have shifted from thinking that anarchist commitments are *more than* a politics to thinking that they are *something other* than a politics. I continue

to return to this latter formulation. It requires thinking things through, not just picking a team; it is more difficult to articulate and it is more troubling to our inherited common sense.[1] I do not think I am alone in this. It has occurred to some of us to register this feeling of otherness by calling our anarchist commitments an *ethics*. It has also occurred to some of us to call these commitments *anti-political*. I think these formulations are, for many of us, implicitly interlinked, though hardly interchangeable. What concerns me here in the main is the challenge of what it could mean to live out our commitments as an ethics—though I think the relevance of this thinking to anti-politics will be clarified as well.

I intentionally write ethics, and not morality: as I see it, ethics concerns the flourishing of life, the refinement of desirable ways of life, happy lives. Tiqqun put it well:

> When we use the term "ethical" we're never referring to a set of precepts capable of formulation, of rules to observe, of codes to establish. Coming from us, the word "ethical" designates *everything having to do with forms-of-life*. … No formal ethics is possible. There is only the interplay of forms-of-life among themselves, and the protocols of experimentation that guide them locally.[2]

Many of us have been able to reject morality as a form of social control, as the stultifying pressure of the Mass on us, as imposed or self-imposed limitation on what we do and what we are capable of doing. Much the same could be said for any *ethical universalism* which, though emphasizing ways

[1] "*Il senso più comune non è il più vero*," wrote the heretic Giordano Bruno: "The most common sense is not the truest." The type of thinking I invoke here takes its distance from what the Mass regards as common sense.

[2] *Theory of Bloom*, LBC Books version, 144. These phrases condense an entire trajectory of writing on ethics that encompasses Deleuze, Agamben, and Badiou, beginning, naturally, with Spinoza and Nietzsche.

implies…

5. Anarchists are against all authority, all representation

implies…

6. Anarchists are against …[7]

Now, most anarchists will drop off at some point in the chain of implication, judging it to have gone too far past what they regard as common sense. (Our enemies might be less inclined to think they have gone too far.) What does this mean? Roughly speaking, that under analysis the initial emphases on opposition to state or religious authority give way to an unbounded hostility to all authority; that the opposition to political representation opens onto being against all representation; and that the critique of the unfoundedness of existing moral codes concludes in a sense of the ungroundedness of all morality. And they do so in two senses: historically, as the overall tendency of anarchism has sufficient time to develop (that it will be repressed and denied by its adherents as well as enemies is not evidence against this); and psychologically or subjectively, since this overall tendency is also an intimate matter in the life of individuals, part of the unconscious of its first and present proponents (and so analogous claims about repression by adherents and enemies most certainly apply).[8]

[7] This is my way of rewriting the contrast between manifest and latent content that Rousselle derives from Freud. Rousselle's way of explicating this has but two statements, one showing the latent content of the other through elimination. Mine has more to do with pushing a thought to its limit. They converge in that, for this to happen, thinking has to engage with the unthought: …

[8] This is obviously where one should reiterate the argument made by Shawn Wilbur and Jesse Cohn against the first wave of post-anarchists: they had built their collective case on a caricaturesque reduction of historical anarchists in their reconstruction of "classical anarchism." Many egoists, for

at the manifest content of the old saws, serially revealing the conflicts they conceal, the latent content that was always implied in them:

1. Anarchists are against the State and Church

   implies…

2. Anarchists are against the structures of representation and power at work in the State and Church

   implies…

3. Anarchists are against any other structures of representation and power analogous to those at work in the State and Church

   implies…

4. Anarchists are against any structure of representation and power

torical argument, although the idea of conditions obviously implies theory. For example, he references in passing the shared approach of the Russian Nihilists and Kropotkin in a discussion of an article by John Slatter: "Slatter took Kropotkin at his word when he argued that '[anarchists must] bend the knee to no authority whatsoever, however respected […] accept no principle so long as it is unestablished by reason' (Kropotkin as quoted in Slatter, 261). Here, however, Kropotkin's rationalism was maintained but only to reveal a useful parallel: 'The appeal to reason rather than to tradition or custom in moral matters is one made earlier in Russian intellectual history by the so-called 'nihilists'' (ibid.). Like Kropotkin, the Russian 'nihilists' (or 'The New People', as they were called) adopted a rationalist/positivist discourse as a way to achieve a distance from the authority of the church and consequently from metaphysical philosophies. The meta-ethics of Kropotkin's work … thus reveals, not 'mutual aid,' but a tireless negativity akin to the spirit of the Russian nihilists: '[the anarchist must] fight against existing society with its upside-down morality and look forward to the day when it would be no more' (Kropotkin as cited by Slatter, ibid)" (146–147).

of life and not moral codes or injunctions, tends to homogenize ways of life in the name of a shared good; it does so by surreptitiously presupposing that good and treating it as a natural fact or self-evident transcultural reality. In short, it rejects transcendent morality only to re-introduce it immanently. Our rejection of this single Good went often enough in the direction of *pluralism*: the story went that there were many Goods, many valid or desirable forms of life. This seemed obvious enough, even intuitive, to many of us. The story went well with anarchist principles of decentralization and voluntary association, and resonated with many in the years when anti-globalization rhetoric emphasized Multiculturalism as a practice of resistance and The Local as the site of its practice. It also made sense, or at least was useful, insofar as it was an efficient way to communicate an anarchist perspective to non-anarchists, especially to potential anarchists.

So here we have two different approaches to ethics. One tries to secure access and orientation to a single flourishing form, the criterion being that it be understandable by all: the Good unifies. The other approach claims that there are many such forms, and this plurality itself is the criterion: the Good distributes itself into Goods. Always suspicious of universalizing claims, for many years I sided (more or less comfortably) with the latter, participating in a game of adding *-s* to the end of words like people, culture, gender, and so on. Though I was never too concerned to recruit, so that the benefits of communicability were irrelevant to me, this game nevertheless seemed linked to an affirmative gesture, affirmative specifically of difference and plurality in the political sphere. There was always the question of recuperation, i.e. that governmental and other institutions so easily incorporated such pluralism into their functioning as its liberal pole (the conservative pole, which was always present implicitly at least, had to do with norms of governance or rule-following generally). For example, these days university administrations

trumpet Multiculturalism louder than anyone else, and Locally Sourced is a hot marketing term. This troubled those of us who took this side, but we countered by emphasizing what could be called raw plurality as opposed to the masticated, digested, and regurgitated version we got from administrators and mouthpieces of all sorts. Choosing pluralism, eagerly or grudgingly, we might have ended up as uneasy relativists; or we might have been working hard to expand the frontiers of liberalism and democracy, there where the word *radical* finds its most docile partners…[3]

I have come to realize, after what I now recognize to be good deal of confusion, if not unconscious hedging, that even as I labored on the limits of pluralism, my thinking was incongruous with that position. My writing and conversations repeatedly gestured in the direction of another position, irreducible to universalism and ever more desperate attempts at pluralism. It is a *nihilism* that denies the validity of the singular Good at the heart of universalism, as well as the distinct senses of the Good at the heart of pluralism. For nihilists, the only ethical gesture is negative: a rejection of the claims to authority of universalism and pluralism. For us, all such claims are empty, groundless, ultimately meaningless. And this is what was really at stake in distinguishing ethics and morality. My idea of a happy life is not something I reason my way to, or choose, but rather something that manifests senselessly… but I can use my reasoning (my judgment, even!) to help in pushing back, reducing, destroying everything that blocks my way of life.

[3] It is also fair to say that, since pluralism is such a key aspect of liberalism, many anarchists simply cling to a kind of radicalized liberalism as their ethics, and their politics, not because of any gaps in their thinking, but because they actually are radical liberals. The problem, of course, is either that they do not recognize it, or that they will not admit it. At least Chomsky, in the 1970 lecture "Government in the Future," admitted as much, advocating a confluence of radical Marxism and anarchism as "the proper and natural extension of classical liberalism into the era of advanced industrial society."

is the belief that ethical truths, if they can be said to exist at all, derive from the paradoxical non-place within the heart of any place" (43). That is, nihilism denies the ground, or at least the grounding or claim to grounding, in ethical universalism and pluralism. "Nihilists seek to discredit and/or interrupt all universalist and relativist responses to the question of place […] nihilists are critics of all that currently exists and they raise this critique against all such one-sided foundations and systems" (44–45). Obviously, this completes the triplicity with which I began this essay.

It is from this triplicity that Rousselle develops his analysis of ethics in relation to anarchism. Rather than argue about existing moral codes or ethical paths, Rousselle suggests that another position has so far remained largely undiscussed: the nihilist one that rejects the authority or normativity of such argumentation. He states that post-anarchists, so far, have approached "classical anarchism" as a universalism (generally based on human nature) and sought to redistribute its ethical impetus in the direction of relativism. What Rousselle seeks to do, by contrast, is to make explicit the implicit core of classical anarchism; and that core, according to him, is ultimately nihilist. "One must therefore seek to remain consistent with the latent force rather than the manifest structure of anarchist ethics, for there is a negativity that is at the very core of the anarchist tradition" (98–99). Centering his discussion on Kropotkin, Rousselle claims that while Kropotkin's manifest ethics was clearly universalist (grounded on an appeal to human nature), his latent ethics was nihilist. "If it can be demonstrated that Kropotkin's system of 'mutual aid' also called for the restriction of the free movement of the individual then it can also be argued that his work, like much of traditional anarchist philosophy, was always at war with itself" (146).[6] The ethical nihilism is revealed by chipping away

[6] Rousselle frames this claim as a claim about theory, and the conditions under which theories are formulated. He does not frame this as a his-

This report on what must be not only my own trajectory, but also part of the history of the last twenty-five years (more or less for some others) is due in part to some crucial pages in Duane Rousselle's *After Post-Anarchism* that consolidated *this* thought of nihilism for me. Rousselle argues that the nihilist position I have just described has always been the ethical core of anarchism, and that we are now in a moment where this may finally be recognized.

2

I want to respond to *After Post-Anarchism* because it contains that significant provocation. Unfortunately, for most of its readers, this book cannot but be an exotic object. To whatever degree it discusses familiar ideas or even lived situations, it does so through arcane routes. Yes, it is difficult reading; but it is not by engaging with what is most difficult in it that readers will happen upon the few remarkable insights that it contains. Rousselle's writing is difficult because of the density of his references and because of an unfortunate penchant for wordiness and digression. Although I would be the last to say that every idea articulated in theoretical or abstract terms can also be phrased in ordinary, so-called accessible language, I suspect that much of what I find valuable in *After Post-Anarchism* can indeed be restated otherwise. I intend to do so here. As I noted, this aspect of *After Post-Anarchism* struck me as an unusually clear formulation of thoughts I had been struggling to express for years (among other places, in the pages of this magazine). So, instead of a broader critique of post-anarchism (which Rousselle has a knack for folding back into a plea for its relevance) I will limit myself to some brief remarks about his misprision of the respective roles of theory and practice.[4]

[4] I do not intend to attack what is all too easy to criticize in a book framed as an intervention into post-anarchism, a topic that I am not con-

tance of post-anarchism, and for framing anarchism too abstractly as an inchoate philosophy. Nevertheless, returning to my principal reasons for writing this essay, I will now praise Rousselle, for some of what he writes about ethics.

3

Early in *After Post-Anarchism* Rousselle states that, answering what he calls "the question of place" (roughly, on what grounds do you make an ethical claim?) there are three types of responses. There are universalist theories, which state that "there is a shared objective essence that grounds all normative principles irrespective of the stated values of independently situated subjects or social groups" (41). This would include most religiously grounded moralities, as well as appeals to human nature. Most such theories are absolutist, but they need not all be so; utilitarianism is an example of a "normative theory that proposes that the correct solution is the one that provides the greatest good to the majority of the population." The second set of theories, which corresponds to what I called pluralism in the opening section, is what Rousselle refers to as ethical relativism. "Relativists believe that social groups do indeed differ in their respective ethical value systems and that each respective system constitutes a place of ethical discourse"(43). That is, there are different systems (of belief, culture, custom, etc.) that may ground morals. Again, there is an interesting subset, a limit-case: "At the limit of relativist ethics is the belief that the unique subject is the place from which ethical principles are thought to arise"(43). This corresponds to most types of individualism.

The provocation I am underlining in Rousselle's book is that, rather than try once more to save pluralism by pushing it farther into a parodic relativism, he pursues what he calls *ethical nihilism.* His first stab at a definition runs: "ethical nihilism

Post-anarchism receives numerous formulations in this book, but really only two definitions. The first is simply that it is a "discursive strategy" (31): not so much a theory as the outcome of ongoing discussions and debates in a theoretical space where anarchism, post-structuralism, and new social movements (as theorized by their participants and outsiders) intersect. In this respect I could make many objections or clarifications, but I will simply note that for such investigations to proceed as Rousselle intends, anarchism (as "classical anarchism," 4 and *passim*) must be interpreted as "anarchist philosophy," sometimes "traditional anarchist philosophy" (39 and *passim*).[5] The second definition, which follows from the first but is more provocative, is that post-anarchism "is simply *anarchism* folded back onto itself" (136). For Rousselle this means an anarchic questioning of the ethical basis of anarchism, a search for the anarchy in anarchism; he later specifies his own version of this folding in terms of the distinction between manifest and latent contents of statements.

Here I can underline both the weakness and the promise of Rousselle's approach. Whatever the silliness of the term post-anarchism, I think the second definition's project of questioning, of folding back reflexively, is of interest to any anarchist who does not take their position on questions of morality and ethics (or anything else, for that matter) for granted. When he is pursuing this sort of questioning, Rousselle is at his strongest. When he is treating the anarchist tradition interchangeably as

cerned with, and which I am sure is less than popular with the readership of *AJODA*. I happily leave the task of settling the accounts of this book with the proponents and opponents of post-anarchism to those who find it worthwhile. I similarly leave to one side the discussion of the relation of Georges Bataille's ideas to ethical nihilism in the book's final chapter.

[5] Rousselle only makes occasional references to "classical" anarchists other than Kropotkin, who is his major case study. I take it this is because Kropotkin is thought of as the most explicitly ethical of the original anarchists, and also because he has been the object of sustained attention among post-anarchists.

a series of historical figures, events, practices, etc. and as the discursive or conceptual framing that can be abstracted from them ("anarchist philosophy"), he is at his weakest. He repeatedly falls into the intellectualist trap of describing actions as the result of pre-existing theoretical attitudes. "Can we at least provisionally admit," he asks rhetorically, "that anarchism is not a tradition of canonical thinkers but one of canonical practices based on a canonical selection of ethical premises?" (129). Freeing himself from the idea of an anarchist movement set into motion by a bearded man's intellect, he remains on the side of the intellect by presupposing of a pre-existing set of premises on which practices are "based" and from which they derive their status as "canonical."

One more critical remark about the weakness in this approach. Rousselle describes post-anarchism in a third way, and this one is not so much a definition as an illustration. He writes that post-anarchism is the "new paradigm" (126) of anarchist thought: "The paradigm shift… that made its way into the anarchist discourse, as 'post-anarchism,' allowed for the realization and elucidation of the ethical component of traditional anarchist philosophy" (129). He is so zealous in his promotion of this term that several times in his book he annexes authors who explicitly reject the term, such as Uri Gordon and Gabriel Kuhn, to the cause. This all seems to me to be in bad taste. There is also a more profound problem at stake: paradigm shifts do not happen because one says they do. The declarative, performative wishes evidenced whenever Rousselle uses the language of advancement or progress, as though what was at stake here was a science, tell us much about his intentions, but always fall flat in terms of convincingness. Even if there is a paradigm shift at work in anarchist theory (or practice!), there is no reason to consider the shift as an improvement. We are probably just catching up to an increasingly complex, chaotic, and uncontrollable world. So I fault him for misunderstanding what a paradigm shift is, for wildly exaggerating the overall impor-

that the cabalists want separate and create a kind of communicational dual power. This idea is also legible in Mohammed Khayati's "Captive Words," published in *Internationale Situationniste* 10:

> *It is thus essential that we forge our own language, the language of real life, against the ideological language of power, the terrain of justification of all the categories of the old world. From now on we must prevent the falsification or recuperation of our theories.*

It is not clear how this is is to be done other than through the process of fragmentation-federation suggested by the anonymous author of "All the King's Men." Khayati concludes by calling for a Situationist dictionary, a linguistic federation tool,

> *a sort of code book enabling one to decipher the news and rend the ideological veils that cover reality. We will give possible translations that will enable people to grasp the different aspects of the society of the spectacle, and show how the slightest signs and indications contribute to maintaining it. In a sense it will be a bilingual dictionary, since each word has an "ideological" meaning for power and a real meaning that we think corresponds to real life in the present historical phase.*

Second option: the councils and their dictionary.

Third option: one might consider unmediatized life or activity somehow beyond Language or Language games. The Spectacle is Language, Language is the Spectacle, insofar as our speech and our writing are bound to this representational form. Part of that is being forced to speak, expected to confess, and desiring it ourselves too—endlessly botched silence. Language

Rather, as passwords, they operate by allowing some people into groups and excluding others, or by broadcasting the imminent presence of a group in some public or semi-public space. Novels in three lines, by comparison, could be decribed precisely as *antislogans*. Slogans are concise, and, concisely, say very little: just enough to determine who passes. F. F.'s micronovels explode back out into dramatic scenes of everyday life, stretched out as it is between impersonal natural accidents and impersonal (or all-too-personal!) political and social dominations. Fénéon could not tell his readers what to think of these events. Nor does his prose suggest any kind of moral judgment. all of that would have been in bad taste. He rather crystallizes what in them is ethical, existential, significance.

9. Two Short-Prose Challenges

In recent decades we have seen the rise of various print and especially digital vehicles for radical prose. We have also, and not coincidentally, felt growing apathy and participated in ugly scenes of information overload. I would echo Oscar Wilde here:

> *It is a very sad thing that nowadays there is so little useless information.*

The goal F. F. set himself at his temp job, that of secretly deploying an effective, but above all seductive prose style, continues to be vital. I, at least, want to be inspired and challenged, not merely informed! Two challenges to that end follow.

A challenge for individuals

In part, my satisfaction in reading the novels in three lines emerged as a fantasy that all of the short prose I produce at work, mostly in the form of email, could be beautifully formed. I wanted, I realized, to tilt the balance in favor of finely crafted, exact, biting little telegrams and away from the *faits-divers* of my everydayness. But I am convinced that it is a matter of

health and good taste to inquire about how so many of us are plugged into media machines as producers or consumers; to inquire, that is, about the aesthetics of flows of text and images. I do not exactly mean that writing in good taste amounts to direct action. The effects of something so subtly written are likely to be largely insensible. It is a far simpler subversion. Fénéon transformed the dull production of copy into an aesthetic event, composing a beautiful series of novels. According to an aesthetic that he lived without compromise, he sent them out anonymously, drawing attention neither to himself nor to the newspaper. It was more important that the stylistic subversion pass, because this was a kind of work refusal.

> With a hook, a washerwoman of
> Bougival fished out a parcel: a healthy
> newborn girl floating downstream.

A challenge for groups

Fénéon's style, the attitude he took on so as to transmit something other than information through these novels, and especially the fact that he took on that attitude by manipulating his contemporary media channels, suggests many challenging questions about today's proliferating information flows. It seems ever more evident that there is a diffuse but very powerful command directed at many of us:

STAY
INFORMED

Our social and political commitments, not to mention the apparent necessities of work, seem to demand that we consume information, without regard for the form it comes in. Most so-called radical channels of information do not really modify the basic form of news and therefore do not alter the command. We have habituated ourselves to divide content and form, and

> *we choose to associate with, or support, particular factions, particular groups, or particular persons. By always taking the side of those within our in-group, we repudiate the representation of the social order that maintains capital, the state, and its technics.*

First option, then: the groupuscles and their cant.

Second option: one could save the workers' councils strategy by rendering them as communications councils, working on the premise that language is for communication, and trying to do it right. This is the solution of *Society of the Spectacle*, but also of an article in *Internationale Situationniste* 8, "All the King's Men" (the title, incidentally, being a reference to Caroll):

> *In-group languages—those of informal groupings of young people; those that contemporary avant-garde currents develop for their internal use as they grope to define themselves; those that in previous eras were conveyed by way of objective poetic production, such as trobar clus and dolce stil nuovo—are more or less successful efforts to attain a direct, transparent communication, mutual recognition, mutual accord. But such efforts have been confined to small groups that were isolated in one way or another. The events and celebrations they created had to remain within the most narrow limits. One of the tasks of revolution is to federate such poetic "soviets" or communication councils in order to initiate a direct communication everywhere that will no longer need to resort to the enemy's communication network (that is, to the language of power) and will thus be able to transform the world according to its desire.*

To the question: how do workers' councils undo spectacular representation? the answer is: because they are communications councils, poetic soviets. They federate the very groups

cisely meant to remind us that public or political space is completely covered, altogether occupied, by an impenetrable web of images, representations, or… words. When they arise unbidden we are to recognize, not words, but the web, the medium.

* * *

Suppose resistance is possible. What does the undoing of the Spectacle mean when one considers that the Spectacle "is" language, is Language?

First option: one could hazard decentering an idea and practice of Language tied first of all to nationalism, to a standardized grammar, secondly to a familiar, largely unconscious cultural conservatism ("the old language is good, the new language is bad"), and third, these two wrapped up in a mediatized dissemination of standard terms and usages. Decentering it, we no longer have Language but *languages*—not just in the sense of the thousands of world languages but also as a congeries of language-games, speech genres, little discourses and narratives within any given language. The idea or representation of Language breaks down into languages, but languages themselves splinter into dialects, slangs, argots, and so on. This is the sense of the project of accelerated fragmentation set up in *Cabal, Argot*: if we are convinced that

> *in-group/out-group dichotomies are the tension that will tear society apart. Disparate groups who do not understand each other are destined to become separate*

then we see that their advocacy of difficult argument is also a kind of test, a test of who understands (gets it, the joke or reference) and who does not—the real-time, in-person formation of the inand out-groups. And so, understandably,

be interested in the content, and ignore the form. Such habits ought to be questioned on aesthetic and ethical grounds. I do, sometimes, want to be a witness. I want to be aware of what I want to be aware of. But I do not wish to suffer from the bad taste of it all: how badly written it is and how insufferably communication unfolds. Sometimes I want to be aware of the suffering of others. But I do not wish to become miserable as a result. It is simply false that the price for remaining receptive to novelty, *nouvelles*, is sadness.

When I began reading these novels and composing my thoughts on them, I was tempted to describe the *faits-divers* as predecessors of RSS feeds, scrolling headlines, or ubiquitous "comments," and Fénéon's style as suggestive of a subversive use of these new headlines. In the few short years since then, there has been a deluge of digital forms of writing and broadcasting short-prose[21], with much attention paid to content, and little to form or style. Some interventions must still be possible. Some young aesthetes must be assembling apparently banal feeds that, upon closer inspection, are so well written that they disrupt an economy of information—just that economy that is making all too many of us stupider every passing minute. N3L? But that is to be optimistic. The question is, who, today, is capable of summoning anything like Fénéon's composure, anything like his gaze, anything like the exact attention that he translated into prose.

Let us not bother, then, with the anxious narrative about the death of newspapers, of print; let us not endlessly circulate the stories about what stultifying digital worlds we are being willingly or helplessly dragged into. Let us rather praise ingenious writing wherever and whenever it incongruously occurs.

Strikers have invaded the Dion factory

[21] Cf. Michael Kasper's delightful essay "Short-Prose," in *The Shape and Spacing of The Letters*. I first learned of Fénéon's novels in another essay in the same book, "Agit-Prop."

in Puteaux, leading the workers there astray. “Only cowards work,” their banner read.

as mediation, both as explicit claim (rare), and reference or implicit awareness (common). In these uses of the idea of Spectacle, what is principally accessed is its aiming-at-the-totality, which is how Language earns its capital L. We come to such an idea, as Debord perhaps did with images, by first aiming at the totality, *all of it*. We come to the anxiety, the primitivists to their refusal, by asking how to *cross it all out*. Here is an example, less hysterical than most, again from *bædan*:

> *All discourse consists of nothing but an endless series of affirmations no more insightful than remarking that water is wet, phrased in more or less interesting and more or less roundabout ways. The rest are lies.*

Aiming-at-the-totality, we get what I’ve denominated Language. The endless series of affirmations (*yes, yes, yes…*) suggests for me a representational language caught in its tautology, as margarine-words wait to be affirmed (code words or slogans to be said yes to) or are offered as ways of being said yes to (passwords), as images are produced in a way completely determined by the medium in which they anticipate circulation. Expressing ourselves with such words or such images may or may not be mediation, but it is certainly mediatization.

As I have noted, the most common attempted escape from margarine-words, *mutant speech* (and the less common one, *acid-words*), leads to a staging of this anxiety (as incomprehension or hostility from readers or listeners, as the speaker or writer’s own anxiety before the risk of meaninglessness). From the point of view of Language, these escape attempts are the incorrect way to play the game and will always register as wrong moves, or morally improper gestures (lies). Those who adopt this point of view, bureaucrats or not, would push us back to the stale comforts of small talk or private exchanges with our intimates, those little spaces we suppose we control—and this fantasy of control over private life, true only for a few, is pre-

Here I, too, will invoke history: the decades that it has taken some to become unsure that workers' councils could be the unbinding of spectacular mediatization (and so spectacular society) or, more generally, that political solutions will unbind political problems without setting the cycle of recuperation back into motion. We who feel this way are at an impasse.

Debord also wrote of the Spectacle

> *the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation.*

More recently Giorgio Agamben stepped forward to amplify Debord on this point, adding:

> *Today… it is clear that the spectacle is language, the very communicativity or linguistic being of humans … in the spectacle our own linguistic nature comes back to us inverted.*

There are at least two ways to understand this statement. One is that it is a clarification, because the Spectacle has always been Language. The other is that it is written to register a historical shift, in the sense that something has happened in or to the Spectacle in the course of the decades between 1967 and 1989. It could also just be a provocation. In any case, for those committed to talk of Spectacle and disruption of Spectacle to pass over to this interpretation would mean apprehending the political impasse (impossibility of situations, absence of councils) as something that unfolds in our speech.

Indeed, the principal form this impasse takes today is the frustration or anxiety about language, usually in the background of our speech (most apparent in those conversations not governed by margarine-words). The impasse is manifest in the borderline nonsensical primitivist allegation that language is the first ideology, a crude translation of the idea of Spectacle

How Slogans End

"How Slogans End" was first published in the second issue of The Anvil Review *in 2011. It was my second contribution to* The Anvil *and a first experiment in discussing language practices of the contemporary anarchist space from the purview of a broader history of experimental poetics, with which the newer practices were accidentally in dialogue. It also takes up the thinking about slogans at the end of "Fénéon's Novels." Parenthetically, the computer programs discussed in "How Slogans End" are no longer available online: the AIMG has simply disappeared, whereas MESOSTOMATIC, which I used to generate the last two poems, has been taken down "due to complaints from arrogant academic windbags," as might have been expected.*

> *Living or dead, that's the big question.*
> *When you get sleepy, do you go to sleep?*
> *Or do you lie awake?*
> — Cage, "Composition as Process"

> *If among you there are those who wish to get somewhere,*
> *let them leave at any moment.*
> *If anybody is sleepy, let him go to sleep.*
> — Cage, "Lecture on Nothing"

1

There is a computer program called the Automatic Insurrectionary Manifesto Generator. AIMG produces this sort of output:

What's needed is not mobilization, and even far less absence, but a putting-into-practice of inoperative crisis, a rejection in all forms of the temporality of humanism.

This is a call to indifference, not an insistence on absence.

We must destroy all humanism—without illusions.

Confronted with those who refuse to recognize themselves in our orgies of negation, we offer neither criticism nor dialogue but only our scorn.

A link labeled "AGAIN" is conveniently centered below the text, inviting us to the pleasures of repetition. It reloads the page and each time generates a three-paragraph manifesto composed of such sentences. AIMG's output is wholly predictable, in a 'mad lib' sort of way. All the titles it produces have the same schema: "Leaving X behind: notes on Y," where X includes "mobilization," "activism," "passivity," "fossilization," "humanism," and so on; and Y includes "crisis," "rupture," "insurrection," or "zones of indistinction which need no justification," for example. The same goes for the rest of the manifestos. You may have encountered its output at its home page, whose link was posted and sent around quite a bit in 2009; or you may have been presented with its texts in a more or less deceptive, more or less mocking way in blogs, or in comments on Anarchist News.

A link at the bottom of the page takes us to "insurrect.rb," the code. Reading those 126 lines was very interesting; despite my limited understanding of programming, the way AIMG operates was clear enough. There is a list of definitions in which words are classed together under headings such as "things we like," "things we don't like," "things we do," "things we don't

Spectacle/Language

Debord wrote of the Spectacle that it is a social relation between persons *mediated* by images. Here *mediated* renders *mediatisé*, which must be both the mediation philosophers speak of, the forceful introduction of a third term into what one would otherwise call an immediate relation, and also the way something or someone is forcefully placed into a medium, into the media. Or, more weirdly, the forceful irruption of a medium in a person or relation between people. In the former case, since *mediation* is often assimilated to *alienation*, a tremendous amount of metaphysical and even moral consequences seem to follow from generalized mediation, as separation from the real, the authentic, or the genuine. In the latter, which could be rendered *mediatization*, we are considering separation itself: separation as a cleavage not only between us but in each of us; as ruined communion and forced communication; as the taxing propagation of detached images.

To dismantle the Spectacle has usually meant to undo mediation, its technological or at least material work of representation, in some way; a good deal has been written about how to do that. Here I would like to consider the undoing, or at least troubling, of mediatization. It is notable that Debord structured *Society of the Spectacle* in a markedly different manner than his earlier Situationist texts. At first, the constructed situation was to be

built on the ruins of the spectacle

holding out the promise (to some, a threat to others) of expressive communion, perhaps of an immediate relation. This construction was up to the individual or group as creator. In *Society of the Spectacle*, as explicated in at the climax of a dense historical narrative, the undoing of the reign of representation is a strictly political affair, the business of the workers' councils.

The other ways language manifests are partially relevant here, but what is truly remarkable is that something like poesy happens, not as literature, not as a secondary aesthetic or artistic consideration, but foremost as the unbidden arrival of language—of speech, of the marks that become writing. Showing us our ancestors speaking exclusively in a poesy that preceded the distinction between literature and myth (as though gripped, at the dawn of language, by that indistinct firstness, its fascination), Vico suggested that poesy might be *the* event of language.

> *people living in the world's childhood were by nature sublime poets*

Or more precisely:

> *in all nations speech in verse preceded speech in prose.*

But not necessarily the advent of what, in all those conversations, we felt the need to reject. Not Language. Of course the history that follows the Vician poetic dawn, the history of civilization, more recently of capital and Spectacle, is the history of Language, of the mediating image, of representation. There is indeed a poetry written in and as Language. Poetry in service of the state; surrealism in service of the revolution. (Debord called the Spectacle the epic poem of the commodity's competition with other commodities.) But there is also—there has never ceased being— poetry in the service of nothing, or in the service of itself, new and irresponsible, another image, another speech, and that is what I think the reference to "Jabberwocky" amounted to in my imagination, and that is how this mask came to life. From there I write to acid-words.

do"; for the most part, then, they are groups of presumed synonyms. (I note with interest that the longest list is "things we don't like".) As I had suspected, the possible outcomes are finite. At first, reading just the code might suggest that the problem with the rhetoric of insurrectionary anarchism is that it is not inventive enough. Its terms are not sufficiently varied or differentiated and therefore they have a tendency to collapse into each other. But is the programmer's goal to use the code to produce a more artful rhetoric?

On the same page as "insurrect.rb" is a "read me" file, which offers the following explanation:

> *The purpose of this little program is to expose the seductions of rhetoric, not to criticize actions taken. Despite my admiration for many of the actions taken in the name of insurrection, I'm suspicious of how easy it is to substitute style for substance in the communiques describing these actions. And this is not to say that all 'insurrectionist' texts are meaningless [...] This program is intended only to demonstrate the pitfalls of language which sounds too good to be meaningful.*

The remarks about substituting "style for substance" and "sounding to good to be meaningful" suggest the contrary: the "purpose" is less rhetoric. To the degree that AIMG accomplishes this goal, it does so by showing the limited inventiveness of what I will call I-discourse. And it does so from a perspective that opts for an uninventive "substance" rather than a superior "style."

One could easily undertake a critique of the programmer's assumptions by asking if the lists of "things we like" or "things we don't like" really contain interchangeable terms. (Or, supposing that they do, how such interchangeability comes about). But there is a more interesting issue, a more profound limita-

tion in the code than finite word lists. Line 75, for example, reads

```
''This is a call to #{things_we_like}, not an
insistence on #{things_we_dont_like}.''
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In prose, this amounts to something like:

Do the good, not the bad

or:

Do what we do, don't do what we don't do.

These are examples of the simplest grammatical formulations of a *moral* code, of a sort we discover in all sorts of discourses. Discovering such a code puts me beyond the desire to critique (to improve by strategic negation). The question becomes one of overcoming a morality that is so easily codified.

The programmer, or whoever wrote the "read me" file, tells me what he sees as the AIMG's purpose. I am free to understand its ouput in that manner or in a variety of others. Now, to overcome the unexamined morality written into the code, I am concerned first of all with wit. Supposing the output has something to do with its stated purpose, that purpose is achieved through being witty. (Of course AIMG is not witty, because it is not a person. But the programmer probably thought he was being witty when he assembled it; and many people think they are witty when they use it and propagate its output.) I take wit to be primarily an aesthetic matter, to be judged in terms of its success. (And there are many sorts of successes. It could be that the joke is on the jokers.) For the overcoming I have in mind, I am also concerned with importance, with some way of getting at the values at play in a moral or ethical system. So let us play a logical game, cycling through possibilities based on varying answers to two questions: Is the AIMG's output witty? And: does the AIMG matter?

by language through the process of domestication. Edelman, one last time: "Thus the birds in their coming lay to waste the world because they so hate the world that will not accept them that they, in turn will accept nothing but the destruction of the world."

The writer in *bædan* concludes:

Here we must understand ourselves as the birds or else the text offers us nothing.

We are the birds, the animals that speak. Which is to say that Jabber-wocky, the language, is not only a pastime, but also something corrosive, destructive, the vehicle of a bodily shift, yes, as with mana-words. It is deployed not only conspiratorially with the aim of orgiastic communion, but to destroy the world (though I would write World, as I write Language).

Jabberwocky, the language, mirrors Language, and it recedes from it, carving out another space for itself; it recedes as it mirrors. What is it showing in its reversal? A fact.

* * *

This fact could be stated as follows:

Poesy happens.

Or:

Acid-words are possible.

The inevitability of language, which is experienced as the urge to speak, to sing, to write, to mark—it sometimes manifests as poesy. Gary Snyder wrote

language rises unbidden.

narrative may be discerned in it, and tone, and feeling; and the words that seem to make that discernment difficult are not beyond explanation—explanation that the author did not even leave to the reader. As Beer writes: stable syntax, strange semantics. Additionally, the prehistory of the first/last stanza as a fake sample of old English shows Carroll's concern, in his construction of portmanteau words for nonsense effects, with real linguistic history and processes of word formation. So what strikes us about "Jabberwocky" is not just the initial shock of nonsense, but also the pleasure of inventiveness, and the related pleasure of commentary on that invention.

Jabberwocky, the language, would then have some or all of these traits: first, speaking and hearing it is pleasurable for most: it is patterned and tuneful, sharing some traits of language as we know it (or whatever dominant Language it exists in initial relation to) and some traits of language as it could have been. Jabberwocky makes enough sense that speakers/readers of Language can follow a story in Jabberwocky, while still feeling the need to call it nonsense. Upon closer examination, speakers/readers of Language will determine that Jabberwocky can't be a complete other to Language. It is not an other Language; it dramatizes something of the coming-into-being of language itself. At the same time, in showing this coming-into-being it is recognized as nonsense and designates sense itself as the precarious factor in speech. Here again I would essay an analogy that is something other than an analogy and say that what is dramatized here is the image of an animal that speaks, as in myth, as in fable, as in reality. In the essay in *bædan* I've already cited, there is a discussion of birds in Edelman's theory and Hitchcock's film, indomitable birds that symbolize "our struggle":

> *in describing this domestication of the world by meaning, Edelman is borrowing heavily from Hocquenghem's understanding of the body as colonized*

2

Given our two questions, there are four positions:

1. The AIMG's output is witty, and it matters.
2. The AIMG's output is not witty, and it matters.
3. The AIMG's output is not witty, and it does not matter.
4. The AIMG's output is witty, and it does not matter.

Now, this logical game is just that – of course anyone may occupy one or more of the positions successively or even simultaneously. But for the sake of the game I summon up a lunar landscape, where four speakers deliver their monologues.

The first two positions emphasize writing. Who has already stepped forward to say that AIMG's output is witty, and it matters? It is the Author (and his audience, amused). Such is the position laid out in the "read me" file; such is the apparent stance of many who posted the link or examples of its output. For them, the machine works; it does what it is pronounced to do. It reveals to us our familiarity with a certain rhetoric. The momentary confusion that accompanies it is supposed to be funny, and to provoke a particular insight. As Bergson so precisely illustrated, the comic usually comes down to either a living thing that acts mechanically or a machine that seems to be alive (See *Laughter*). The AIMG is obviously a case of the second. The Author knows that, in reading an automatically generated manifesto, I will likely, at least initially, attribute some authorial intention, some message, to the text. When I discover or when it is revealed to me that I have been fooled, I may be angry, amused, confused … Aha! And ha! ultimately I will laughingly accept the lesson of the AIMG. The AIMG's output is not meaningful, it is *just* rhetoric! The apparent fancyness of the language is belied by the simplicity of reproducing something like it. And, for the Author (and his audience, amused),

such automatically produced rhetoric is not what our political common sense demands. Sometimes I want to side with the little pleasure evidenced in this position: pleasure in a machine that works, the pleasure of repetition. AGAIN!

A second voice intervenes and says: but the AIMG's output is not something like I-discourse. The simplicity is in the attempt at recreation, which therefore fails, not in I-discourse itself, which is meaningful. This amounts to saying that AIMG's output is not witty, and it matters. Who has spoken? It is the Critic. This is the voice of the audience, unamused, expressing their revolt. For them, the machine does not work; it does not or cannot do what it is pronounced to do. It presupposes lazy habits of reading, in which people respond badly to jargon they do not recognize, complex ideas and theories that require long study, etc. The Author's common sense has spoken up and said: the AIMG demonstrates the hollowness of I-discourse. The Critic responds: you are the fool who does not discriminate between the meaningful original and the meaningless bad copy! For this speaker, what the AIMG actually reveals is a misprision of I-discourse: the output's lack of meaning is not an example of anything. The synonyms are not synonyms; the terms are generally not used with sufficient precision. The Critic engages, then, in a militant defense of a militant discourse. I am this critic, too, sometimes: much of the time I want to side with the defense of complex ideas, of study, even in a certain sense of the mutant speech that is theoretical jargon, and to be suspicious of the common sense that warns away from all that. At the same time, it is difficult to side with a humorless Critic, and unwise to take the side of the good original against the bad copy.

The latter two positions place emphasis on the activity of reading rather than that of writing. The third belongs to one who, bored, says nothing. If we poked him and demanded a response, he might sigh like a character from Beckett: what matter where the simplicity originates? For he who is Bored,

last, that my interlocutor had in mind. You have probably seen it:

> 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe*:*
> All mimsy were the borogoves,
> And the mome raths outgrabe.

It appears in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, where Alice first encounters it as a mirror-image. Upon reading it, she remarks "it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't know exactly what they are." The five stanzas between the first and last, though they all include nonsense words, follow a kind of adventure narrative.

> *Beware the Jabberwock, my son!*
> *The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!*
> *Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun*
> *The frumious Bandersnatch!*

And so on. Gillian Beer observes:

> *The syntax in 'Jabberwocky' is stable, although the semantics are odd, so the story is stable though its elements are obscure.*

A little less than twenty years earlier, Carroll had published the first/last stanza as a "curious fragment" under the title "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry." Definitions for the eleven key words followed; in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the anthropomorphic egg Humpty Dumpty offers similar (but not identical) definitions to Alice.

In sum: though an exemplar of nonsense verse, "Jabberwocky" is hardly nonsense in the usual sense of the word. A

I am not sure. It would have been easy enough to object that he explained the idea using ordinary English and not Jabberwocky. I would rather emphasize—what has made this conversation stick in my memory—that when seeking a way out of Language (as Spectacle, with all of the implied traits of Spectacle—totalizing, mediating, representative, communicative—that speech, in short, that places us on the side of instituted authority and authority to come), he gave it the name of a poem. The name of the language is the title of a poem; and the title of the poem is a nonsense word. He invoked for me, that is to say, the studied play with language that poetry can involve.

To get to *acid-words*, I set out from this insight. It is perhaps a paradox, or maybe just the weird way things go, that the greatest refusal of the urge to repeat becomes the motor of creation, of differentiation. To get to acid-words, I take inspiration from a poetic outlook, not to recommend poetry in one form or another, but rather to speak as one who has been transformed in his relation to language by poetic speech and writing. This is something other than a defense of art, much less of literary institutions or canons. I am less concerned to defend the arts than to acknowledge the fact of their various existences, valued for some, dangerous and despised for others, as one aspect of that inevitability of speech I referred to above. I would now recast it as an inevitability of expression. On the side of writing, this fact is greater than literature, though literature flows from it; on the side of speech, it includes all sorts of symbolic and linguistic creativity, including the anonymous productions of slang, argots, cant, and various other oral joys: the *poesy* that happens as if by accident (though what is accidental is knowing it is poetic, knowing it as poetry).

* * *

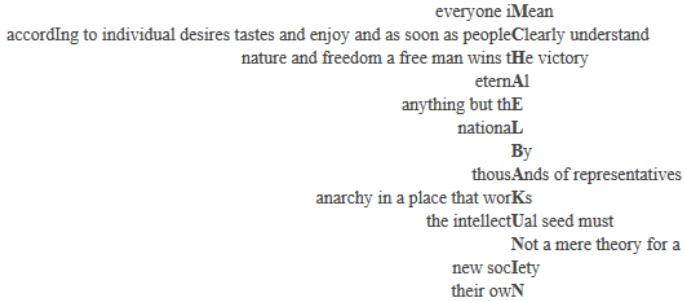
"Jabberwocky": the poem, and then the imagined language. The poem first: it was of course the first stanza, identical to the

AIMG's output is not witty, and it does not matter. The position of the Bored is similar to that of the Critic, but represents its degree zero. For him the output's lack of meaning does not reveal anything of importance. It rather reveals the habit of reading in a generic way. When the Bored learns that he has been fooled, all that he takes to have been revealed is the habit as such. But this sort of insight is available in more or less any event of reading, whether the text in question has been written by one or more people, in part or entirely automatically, etc. I note with interest that this could equally well be the position of someone who uses I-discourse, or of someone who does not. The former would be like the Critic, but unconcerned about the way the AIMG misses the mark. The latter would not see this as an important lesson: everyone knows that GIGO. Sometimes this is my position – anytime, really, if I am bored.

This leaves the position of one who thinks AIMG's output is witty, and it does not matter. She speaks last. I call this the position of the Curious. It is similar to the position of the Author, but is characterized by an excess of amusement, an unruly overflow of amusement beyond the stated lesson of the "read me." This amusement, not grounded in the thought of a lesson or its importance, suggests manners of writing and reading of which the AIMG is the crudest form. So she has little use for the AIMG according to its Author's intention for it, since she can't imagine any way to use it and be witty. She who is Curious says: doesn't this all suggest that the truly remarkable question here concerns the capture of a vocabulary by a grammatical-moral code, whether or not the AIMG is a good example of it? What does *that* reveal, not about I-discourse, which is a fashion of the times, but about political rhetoric (including the minimalist rhetoric we call "common sense") in general? Most of the time I am interested in unserious ways of reading. So, curious, I have seized AIMG as an example, staging my curiosity by offering an illuminating counter-example.

3

There are two computer programs called IC and MESOLIST. They produce this sort of output:



Using IC and MESOLIST, John Cage invented a writing machine that produced what he called mesostic poems, a variant of the more familiar acrostic poem. In acrostics, it is usually the first letter of each line that, read vertically, forms a name or phrase. In mesostics, the vertical component, or "spine," is in the middle of each line. The mesostics invite multiple forms of reading, not the least of which is reading aloud, because they are themselves ways of reading and invitations to creative re-reading. This is so inasmuch as the mesostics are composed of either an entire given text (in *Empty Words*, for example, Cage explains how he used mesostics using the spine "JAMES JOYCE" to "read through" *Finnegans Wake*) or a set of quotations from various writers. Often other strings of letters appear, such as the names of authors and the titles of books. (One might conclude that it is not just re-reading or "reading through," but *study* that is at stake, though this would require dramatically re-evaluating what we usually mean by that word.) Cage composed many texts in which a love of language, of the ideas, words, and sounds in his preferred authors combined with his serene and studied use of random processes

of language", but this kind of classification and attempted engagement completely misses the affective withdrawal of the not-so-thought-out refusal. The gesture I am writing about is the gesture of the many who feel primitivists are right about *something*, while not wanting to discuss it as a matter of philosophy or theory. The point— the *symptom*—is the feeling, the acceleration of the refusal. That is why, finally, there is some vague sense in the conversation, if it gets this far, that the refusal of language is part of a long list of refusals, and the reference to language is one more way of talking about Everything or The Totality or Capital or Civilization, etc. The conversation I recall was an unremarkable example except for one detail. Perhaps in jest, one of the speakers said that he advocates "speaking in Jabberwocky" as a way out of the Language he knows.

I think he meant that Jabberwocky, the language, is not an other to English, but an other to Language—to language as we know it. "Speaking in Jabberwocky" takes the refusal of Language into account; it is in fact a hypothetical practice emerging from this refusal. And in this refusal I imagine a demand that repetition, conscious or unconscious, dull or creative, come to a halt. Language appears to them as part of a Totality that cannot be simply sidestepped, because some urge to speak is inevitable, and Language is precisely the government of those urges, their guidance, standardization, branding, and so on. But since these individuals will not be governed, and since, so desperation says, eventually all speech decays into margarine-words, and perhaps that is all it ever was, they conclude that we should just somehow stop. Without positing an immediate way out (or a way out to immediacy), "speaking in Jabberwocky" intimates something else: what one could do with that inescapable urge is to speak in a way that is nonsensical. What was my interlocutor getting at with this reference to nonsense? A parodic speech, a parody of speaking? Speech in a very different kind of code, in an invented language?

merely reactive strategy, with one more critique? Is anything really gained by sublimating the pleasure of sloppiness?

A third form of mutant speech would be to generate the mana-words oneself. But that would already be something else, translation or creation. In short, no longer repeating. I call those words, as they are created, or when they are recharged with *mana*, *acid-words*.

Jabberwocky, the language

The language Jabberwocky came up, as I recall, in a conversation some years ago, one among many conversations with anarchists where a discomfort with language was manifest. I later diagnosed this discomfort as an anxiety. I only remember some of the participants, many of whom I had just met that night, and, as usual, I think more people were listening than speaking.

How the discomfort was manifest that night, what repeats in such anxious conversations, is not difficult to outline. First, there seems to be an ambient impatience, some frustration with language as such. This can begin with a few words on the language of an enemy, with the vilification of a politician or a onetime friend, but it eventually extends to anyone's use of language. From bullshit to ideology; from dishonesty or disingenuousness to a generalized paralysis of expression. Here's the second part: someone will make an implicit or explicit reference to a certain primitivist refusal of language, or what some call "symbolic culture" generally, a kind of reference to its existence, without taking it on—for good reason. As these conversations often show, primitivism is something more like a commonplace reference than a stated position… Really, what is there to debate here? For a few engaged interlocutors, it is easy enough to include someone named John Zerzan in the twentieth-century philosophy category in Wikipedia, or to write an article criticizing his "philosophy

for composition. Now, Cage's music remains obscure for most. Among those I know who are familiar with his name, it usually functions as a historical point of reference rather than an object of appreciation (an artwork). His writing is, I suppose, even more mysterious. But it is also light, the lightest butterfly-writing one could ever wish to read. It is our problem if we are the ones who expect a message from either. Using IC and MESOLIST, Cage wrote several books of compiled and interlinked mesostics, such as *I-VI*, *Themes and Variations*, and the one that concerns me here, *Anarchy*. MESOLIST lists "all words" in the source texts "that satisfy the mesostic rules" (*I-VI*, 1). IC, "a program … simulating the coin oracle of the *I Ching*," is used to decide "which words in the lists are to be used and gives … all the central words" (*ibid.* A more complete discussion of this process with respect to its creation and use may be found in *Empty Words*, 133-136). In *Anarchy*, the source material is thirty quotes from Kropotkin, Malatesta, Bakunin, Tolstoy, Thoreau, Whitman, Goldman, Goodman, Buckminster Fuller, Norman O. Brown, and Cage himself. For example: "Periods of very slow changes are succeeded by periods of violent changes. Revolutions are as necessary for evolution as the slow changes which prepare them and succeed them" (Kropotkin); "The liberty of man consists solely in this: that he obeys natural laws because he has himself recognized them as such, and not because they have been externally imposed upon him by any extrinsic will whatever, divine or human, collective or individual" (Bakunin). But also: "What we finally seek to do is to create an environment that works so well that we can run wild in it" (Norman O. Brown); "I'm an anarchist, same as you when you're telephoning, turning on/off the lights, drinking water" (Cage). Or even little stories such as this one, drawn from Hyppolite Havel's biographical sketch of Emma Goldman: "In San Francisco, in 1908, Emma Goldman's lecture attracted a soldier of the United States Army, William Buwalda. For daring to attend an Anarchist meeting, the free

Republic court-martialed Buwalda and imprisoned him for one year. Thanks to the regenerating power of the new philosophy, the government lost a soldier, but the cause of liberty gained a man."

These quotations and the twenty-five others, in which the use of "rhetoric" as construed by the Author and the Critic is generally at a minimum, reappear in fragmentary form according to the processes described above. Sometimes, as in the mesostic I have already cited, the explicitly anarchist nature of the content is evident (though not for all that clear in the sense implied by the desire to reverse the priorities of "style" and "substance"). Sometimes it is not so evident:

cAnnot
solelY in this
thE
And
fRee
songs oF
able whole-heaRtedly
gOing
aMan draws now as
becoMe
wOrld
admittiNg failure
nbsp;Develop
stAnding
curiousitY

Most of the mesostics invite me to active reading. How many ways can you read this delightfully polysemic excerpt?

Cage's mesostics may be understood in the context of a long history of writing experiments undertaken for their own sake, that is to say: for pleasure. This field is vast, but arguably its sundry protagonists all share in a suspicion towards, a method-

does not just have to be more or less successful communication. It is first of all attempted *communion*. Play with mana-words is not unlike covering one's body with water or make-up, or fragrances or lotions, or also smearing oneself with a stream of spit, cum, piss, or shit that one wishes were continuous. The criteria at work here are aesthetic or hedonistic. Others are begged, sometimes commanded (if the speaker or writer is a top), to smell, to feel the mana-words. The speaker or writer appears for a second as they cover themselves in these words-marks, smearing themselves and sometimes smearing others. From the specialized and academic point of view, this is the least competent kind of mutant speech; in the milieu, it is one of the most common forms, the little dance some do when they first become enamored with what we call theory.[4] It is repetition for its own pleasurable sake, repetition discovered as a pleasurable event, the breakdown of the passwords and codewords and joy in that failure.

A second form, more competent from the point of view of the specialists, deploys the mana-words in baroque combinations and ornate arrangements. The speaker or writer shows, not their smeared skin, but their entire body as it approaches escape velocity… no ordinary language can catch up to this theory machine. The repetition becomes communicative to an extent, though the effects of extraction are still felt: this is repetition with a difference. Though the more pedestrian critics cannot distinguish between this spaceflight and the smearing, those who discern the difference are left asking: why these terms and not others? Why these theorists? The recession of this mutant speech from what is most oppressive about margarine-words is clear enough: but who is satisfied with a

[4] McKenzie Wark calls this "low theory." See his *The Beach Beneath the Street*, and my comments in "Ways in And Ways Out of the Situationist Labyrinth," *The Anvil Review* 4.

argots of every sort, as three instances of linguistic creativity too underdetermined to reliably motivate and parallel power operations. Mana-words are effective situationally, for some people, in some ways. They are repeated, but not on condition of being recognized. They do not always assume contect, but often require context to be established in the real time of speech—mutant speech.

* * *

Everything I've written on mutant speech so far has been an engagement with the imagined (always imagined and imaginary) ordinary speakers of a language, those whose life is a perpetual risk of margarine-words. On the other side, those who have opted for a less ordinary path, familiar with mutant speech, exhibit different relations to mana-words. Mutant speech could also be called *queer speech*, being close to what is discussed in the journal *bædan* as

> *a force which can interrupt the domination of language over life*

Though I would call that language *Language*, the ordinary Language with its margarine-words. In *bædan* we read

> *We engage with language insofar as we can deploy it in service of the body. We speak, we put word to paper in order to send a wink to those with whom we have not yet or cannot at present conspire in a practice of jouissance*

Jouissance, parenthetically, being a perfect example of a mana-word. Some take maximum pleasure in their repetition, enjoying an almost uninterrupted flow of mana-words. Here I will resort to some analogies that are less than analogies, along the bodily lines laid out in *bædan*, to show that mutant speech

public's revolution is the destruction ofAll coercive ties it is
public's revolution is tHe
give the gOvernments
the pubLic's revolution is the destruction of all
organization of all public services bY those who work in them in their own
power serve to make known andCoordinate the desires and interests of people
of regions revolUtion is the
which act thRough
that exIst
and must nOt take part and the
way can people be freed fromSlavery
the free federatIon
broughT about
which enslaves people will be abolished onlY in this way can people be freed

ical sidestepping of, the traditional image of the artist as beautiful and creative soul who, inspired, materializes the artwork. They all have in common a sense that there are social, political, psychological, even metaphysical blocks to the outflow of creativity. Arguably, from Dada to Burroughs and beyond, many of these experiments have discovered their pleasure in some form or another of the game called *épater la bourgeoise*. For Cage, by contrast, the writing machine that makes mesostics is meant neither to shock anyone nor to reveal a hidden truth or reality by subverting the rules of writing. If there is a resemblance to the motivations of the authors I am alluding to, it is in their common suspicion of the author as ego, as consciousness. In their own way they all echo that fascinating Nietzschean lesson, that consciousness is a second-order process, a derivative of the interplay ("combat") of non-conscious forces, drives, affects, or desires. What Cage added, then, is the most innocent turn imaginable: I would say that, rather than shocking, he only wishes to play.

Indeed, there is no critique, implicit or explicit, in Cage's writing machine. What goes in is what he wishes to affirm; what comes out is in another way also what he wishes to affirm. They are "golden passages," as Giambattista Vico used to say. There is no real point to this doubling other than the plea-

sure it affords: there is no growth or insight, other than one which may come as randomly as any as long as we keep playing. "As we go along (who knows?) an idea may occur in this talk. I have no idea whether one will or not. If one does, let it" ("Lecture on Nothing," 110). Cage followed Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan in claiming that work was already obsolete. "Instead of working, to quote McLuhan, we now brush information against information. We are doing everything we can to make new connections" (*Anarchy*, vi). Reading is then the *last* thing we should describe as labor: the labor of reading, in all its seriousness, is subsumed in a game of reading. The game is not a way to unwind from labor; but labor is a particularly wound-up sort of move in the game. It is justifiable only as a matter of taste.

Cage paid homage to his influences and inspirations in a schizoid way, drawing them into, drawing them along in his mesostics. Who among us knows how to play along with such unserious affirmations? Many of the more or less anonymous masks that leave their comments on the mirror pools of the Great Web know what to do with such a list of names and such a set of quotations. They attack some names, defend others, negate, launch petty attacks, etc. The paranoia of Critics! When we are these sad egos we miss the pure affirmation of Cage's writing machine. It multiplies the originals, diffracting them not just by reinterpretation or application of them to new conjunctures and objects; it disassembles them down to the level of word, letter, and phoneme. This is precisely how we could overcome the sad egos that we accidentally fall into being. (Sadness is always an accident.) Embracing randomness, chaos, everything in language games or discourses or speech genres that is not under our control: it could mean liberating our language, if that does not sound too trite. It could also mean unbounded pleasure.

use of extraction is precisely this newly generated specificity and orientation, which can also be a kind of studied uselessness. The *détournement* of margarine-words takes place when speakers recognize the speech situation into which they have been placed, or into which others are trying to place them, and begin to speak from the perspective of the extraction of terms (sometimes even hinting at a possible extraction will do to destabilize the situation).

When one finally accedes to mutant speech, it is easy enough for another to point out that such speech, what is called its theory, cannot be put into practice. Indeed, that uselessness is precisely the desired interfering effect that the *détournement* operated. It is more difficult to understand in what sense the circulation of extracted mana-words is itself a practice of language, a different kind of repetition. The mana-words so circulated (cited alongside practices) always generate confusion. If they do not, it is because they are in the process of becoming, or have already become, new margarine-words. So people are right that abstract concepts, and mutant speech generally, cannot be put into practice without a process of interpretation and concretization. This process could render them margarine-words, or it could produce bizarre new practices (but bizarre practices could also appear on their own with no forethought on anyone's part).

One might note, for example, that it is precisely mana-words that never return to us from propaganda machines in spectacular forms. Margarine-words are shared with and to a large extent take their motive power from the mass and its leaders. Some will always be engaged in saying what *freedom*, *justice*, and *hope* really mean, and it will always be a waste of time. These words do too much work for the mass and its leaders in a society like ours. Mana-words are non-recuperable precisely because they have no generalized use. That is why I write mana-words and not theory, placing them besides what is most compelling about poetic speech and

in-language. It is not so different to say: *I will not use this term* than to say: *I do not enjoy this poetry.*

The idea that what is said in mutant speech can be always translated into the talk of margarine-words is ultimately a prejudice in favor of the latter that costs us the potentials of the former. Though it is not always activists that do it, its most stereotypical form is the activists' bid to translate other forms of speech and writing into what they deem ordinary language (whatever is meant by this, it is a medium for margarine-words). The accusation of abstraction amounts to preparation for such translation, since margarine-words are equally likely to be abstract, their apparent familiarity coming down to the greater rate of their repetition, their more successful function as passwords or codewords. I would recommend to those that demand translation into common terms that they merely respond to mutant speech with *I don't understand this speech*, which should mean something not too different from *I don't like this music or this poetry.*

Someone who finds they hate all music or all poetry and feels that it can and should be expressed in another form, or not be expressed at all, might in that moment consider the silence they are wishing for, as the best possible form of what otherwise has to be taken to mean *I do not know what music is, or I have no true experience of poetry.* As saying so would usually be taken as a request for acquaintance or explanation, the most I can recommend to one who finds themselves in such a relation is not forced translation but silence. About which more further on.

* * *

The rarity of mana-words, their degree of abstraction, is tied to extraction procedures. It is a rare thing to be able to extract a word from its context and redeploy it. In its extracted form it can become useless in its former context. The function and

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When it occurred to me to seize upon the AIMG as an example, I supposed I had been waiting on Cage, patiently seeking an opportunity to re-engage with and share his mesostic experiments. Now I feel things are the other way around, as though he had been waiting on me, offering his smiling face as a mask. I daresay I have been used by him – in the gentlest way imaginable. I have proposed that the mesostics in *Anarchy* are the illuminating counter-example we need to question the AIMG. But I also think I have made clear that they are not against, counter to, anything. It is ultimately not interesting to me to occupy the position of the Author nor that of the Critic. I find nothing objectionable in the existence or use of AIMG. I occupy rather the readerly positions of the Bored and the Curious. But he who is Bored has nothing to add to this conversation (unless, interestingly, it becomes a conversation about boredom – but I will leave that for a future essay). She who is Curious regards AIMG as an embryo of something, as an opportunity to read and write differently – perhaps, eventually, to speak differently as well. A hint of this was evidenced when someone commented on Anarchist News that some of AIMG's output was not so bad, after all: "yeah! a few times i found some lines that i actually dug! haha!" Let us go farther in this absurdist, affirmative direction. It is, I think, the mask Cage was always holding out to us. Let us treat AIMG as a partial, unconscious, fortuitous reach in the direction of a project I would like to fantasize about more fully: a way of rewriting and rereading everything that we care to read. A machine to dissolve slogans.

Let me explain. I place myself between the Bored and the Curious because I have little use for AIMG as it is offered to me by someone who says "this program is intended *only*…" But neither do I want to intervene and replace that intention with another, correct, counter-intention. Someone wants the program *only* to show something about the rhetoric of

I-discourse, and perhaps more generally about rhetoric; I reply: that is *only* another floating statement. It seems to me that a written statement of intention, separate from the writing in question, should be approached as the strangest of clues. Especially when the Author is more or less anonymous; at least presented with a body and a face one may hear the tone of words, study facial expressions, analyze posture and gesture, take in the surroundings and context, and so on. This is already the case when one is reading a poem, essay, or manifesto. It is far more of a problem when it comes to randomly generated output. So I have set aside the authority of the Author, and treated his claim of intention merely as one way of reading. His is a rhetoric that aims to dissolve itself: the rhetoric of minimal rhetoric, perhaps of zero rhetoric. What about rhetoric as an art? It has long been agreed that rhetoric must involve an aesthetic component, since it is first and foremost the art of speaking to crowds, of condensing a message. The message, unfolded, could in some cases be spelled out as a series of reasoned arguments; enfolded, the arguments become enthymemes, generated by the invention of the speaker. The art is in the invention, which, classically, means the speaker's style. Suspicion towards rhetoric is (which is as ancient as rhetoric) is focused on the danger of a message, surreptitiously encoded in an eloquent style, and so concealed from reasoned criticism: an enthymeme that is lovely or effective but that does not unfold into a reasoned argument. "Sounds good" is thus suspiciously separated from "is meaningful" and the relation between the two is always in question.

Here I invoke Cage's mesostics, and generally his practice of voiding his art of intention and ego. If there is any rhetoric in the mesostics, it is in the input alone; the poetic form makes it impossible to deliver a message. This strange form of communication that undoes rhetoric also unbinds aesthetics and morality. The author of AIMG both chooses his lists of synonyms and

judgment of complicity with oppressive institutions. As to the accusation, first, mana-words are not necessarily abstract. Abstraction is rare, and that's what is desirable about acceding to it; mana-words are rare as well but only sometimes abstract. At one point *potlatch* was a mana-word, as was mana itself, which gave me the idea (Mauss glosses it as "spiritual force"). Nothing especially abstract about them, just the novelty of their appearance in our language. In the case of truly abstract words, such as *singularity*, no one really knows what abstraction is or does; we have precious few opportunities to discover what it can do as a linguistic operation. I have already outlined why and how an activist or *actionist* would respond to it with hostility. Part of the way margarine-words operate is such that many reserve the right to declare that their speech (e.g a word like *people* or *community*) is not abstract, while other terms (e.g. *biopower*) are. This is more or less willfully misinterpreting the rarity of the word's appearance (which in many cases signals precisely the novelty or fragile instability of mutant speech) as the only index of its present and future purchase or effects. As for the judgment of institutional complicity, such a reaction is obvious enough to predict: anyone who is trained to read or speak in an academic setting (usually the institution in question) is taken to respond primarily to that social/work space and only secondarily to the milieu. Be that as it may, it seems to me that an individual's allegiances are very important when deciding whether to collaborate with, trust, or befriend them, and not very important at all in appraising their speech or writing in its sheer functioning or manifestation. But then those concerned would have to allow themselves to be drawn (or not) by the mana-words themselves instead of trying to determine what team their user is on. Rather than a lazy dismissal of terms due to their abstraction, one could simply opt out of their circulation and not use them, sparing the rest of their circle their *ressentiment-*

regards the overall effect as purely destructive, or whether the new content generated in moments of negation and obfuscation is of any, even temporary, use.

A kind of ludic strategy unfolds in the second case, an idiom characterized not by the oily morality of margarine-words but by the attraction and repulsion of *mana-words*. Mutant speech, the strange constructions formed when mana-words are assembled into talk, is another form the compulsion to repeat may take. It is, on the whole, more conscious and deliberate than the repetition of margarine-words; it appears at the edge of politics, there where it spills over into the anti- and a-political.

Mana-words are the seemingly untranslatable terms that anthropologists, philosophers and other theorists invent or radically repurpose, their clumsy or graceful neologisms, and their redeployment of ordinary words from living and dead languages. Mutant speech is recognizable in that its repetitions are not of the familiar margarine-words, but citations of more or less rare mana-words. Mutant speech is not just the use of mana-words judged competent by experts and specialists, but encompasses an entire range of hesitations, creative mistakes, more or less willful misinterpretations, and qualifications that betray, sometimes, a hyperconsciousness of language, and, at other times, a kind of psychotic break-out from the neurotic repetition of margarine-words. This last phenomenon could be described as a successful but involuntary *détournement* of margarine-words as described earlier.

Our action-oriented milieu tends on the whole to respond badly to mana-words unless they are old and familiar (often in the process of becoming margarine-words). In our gray space many are not comfortable with mutant speech, preferring what they take to be ordinary language, which always includes a set of socially or sub-culturally approved margarine-words. When mutant speech arises in their presence, or when reading presents them with too many mana-words, many immediately hurl the accusation of abstraction, and some also deliver a

composes the (moral) code that arranges them; the mesostics, though they begin with golden passages, do not allow their author any control over their fragmentary rearrangement in the poems (as parts or as wholes), and thus the code does not contain, explicitly or even implicitly, a morality. There is thus no problem with rhetoric, because it has finally been undone; but there is a curious question of aesthetics (of pleasure) left over. "Sounds good" as well as "is meaningful" can no more be said to coincide than to differ. The question becomes not "does it say anything?" or "what does it say?" but "who is reading?"

Releasing writing from intention and thus from morality, voiding intention and thus the ego in writing, is the barely explored challenge that AIMG gestures towards. And it is Cage's mesostics, or something like them, that allow us to flesh out the fantastic reach of such a gesture. It is the greater randomness of Cage's process that allows us to both diagnose the secret alliance between the ego and morality (we could call it *conscience*) in political rhetoric and to discover the ego in its very emergence. I mean that, in the terms I have been employing, the ego emerges in reading, not in writing. Ego is not there in the composition of a text or code, but seems to have been there after the fact; this semblance, this mask, depends on ignoring or minimizing the importance of our practices of reading. I am not suggesting that the ego should always be voided (as though that was up to us!), but that it is productive and endlessly fascinating to create writing machines that allow us to discover it. If we do this gracefully, we will guiltlessly summon up pleasure. We might eventually get better at observing how our egos, our masks, congeal in more or less rigid acts of reading. Boredom is one path; curiosity is another. The Author and the Critic cling too rigidly in their roles to the importance of their activities to allow, as the Bored and the Curious do, their masks to dissolve or shatter in excessive laughter. Nonserious reading: ludic, festive, voluptuous.

It could begin by inventing and using writing machines that consume and transform every dull index that crosses our paths: I mean all those unexamined words that make up our slogans, that pepper our statements of intent, mission and vision, our little manifestos. I also mean those *mana*-words that theoreticians enjoy moving around their chessboards. We can do it if we can learn to inject the impersonal and random into our writing, and eventually our speech. I dream of a way to complicate the desire to say, speak, or mark, to send a message or command, in its badly omened collusion with repetition. Ah, the dull indices! Who is not tired of Freedom, Democracy, Sustainability, Consent … even of Attack and Destroy? Clearly AIMG does not go far enough. We need a superior machine, a crueler code.

Reading through AIMG, one last program, MESOSTOMATIC:

Reading through "How Slogans End," too:

AGAIN!

it is easy enough to agree. But that is because I take Orwell's rules as an excellent means to dismantle the imagined style guide (of anarchists, of activists, of leftists, of identity politicians, of many others). That, however, is the limit of their usefulness. For it is not really a question of better writing in a space where so few read and even less write. The tensions at work in our speech will not be resolved by codifying written language, or even improving its style.

That is why it is telling that Crimethinc. returns to speech. Questioning the normality that margarine-words depend on and reproduce, and the communication that can only be assumed as given and available by the frightened, the path to mutant speech is another road to what Crimethinc. calls a mutual undertaking; and the challenge to reality is the path to acid-words, speech and writing beyond hope and fear,

"*if it really is dangerous.*"

Part 2: Amoral

Beneath the poetry of the texts,
there is the actual poetry,
without form and without text.
— Antonin Artaud

Mutant Speech

The preceding is mostly a critique of the continued use of words whose significance is exhausted by the context they are caught in. I am now led to an argument in favor of words that function differently, the *mutant speech* I've already had occasion to reference. *Détournement* is sometimes a sign of being trapped, and at other times the operation of those who are capable of entering another space. It depends on whether one

I said margarine-words were not just jargon terms, but slogans, compact phrases, sometimes whole fragments of speech. To their ready instrumentality I can now add the trait that reading Williams made me realize was missing: *fear*. Margarine-words mobilize fear; they result from a fearful impression, and their use perpetuates that same fear. The flight away from that fear could result in adopting a different set of margarine-words (and attempting to frighten the frighteners: turf-war as debate), or developing a taste for mutant speech or even acid-words.

I suppose I am more pessimistic than either Williams or Crimethinc., but I will agree with the latter when they write

> *if we stay within the bounds of language that is widely used in this society, we will only be able to reproduce consensus reality, not challenge it*

and (this is of equal importance):

> *those who are convinced that they speak precisely—yet see imprecision virtually everywhere they look—rarely communicate well with others. That's not how communication works. It is a mutual undertaking, for which rulebooks are no more useful than they are for any other kind of voluntary relationship.*

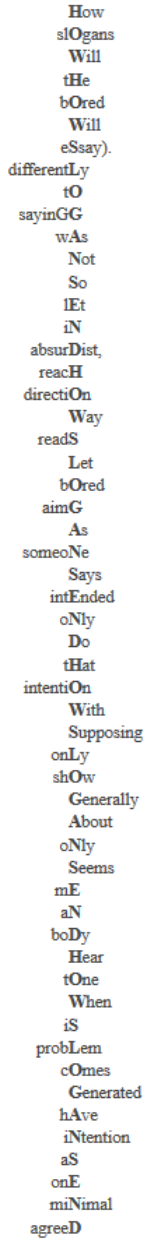
In any case, when Williams repeats Orwell's "principle",

> *Let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about*

and his six rules for English prose, adding

> *were there a contemporary anarchist style guide, nearly all of these rules would be reversed,*

leAving
behInd:
forMs
orGanize,
leAving
behInd:
forMs
loGic
representAtion
derIde
aflaMe
nothinG
thAn
theIr
forMs
loGic
representAtion.
Illusions.
coMmence
desirinG-bodies
heArt
frIendship.
theMselves
neGate
norMalization
towArds
Needed
Is
Far
lEss
Social
rejecTion
fOrms



> *People who write this sort of thing may have some general idea of what they are trying to say—but they needn't have.*

I was pleased to see the very word that first triggered some of these thoughts noted in his article:

> "*Accountability," "community," "solidarity," and "freedom" are used, in the overwhelming number of cases, simply as markers to signify things we like or favor.*

Agreed. What I think I am adding to this, what Williams does not discuss, is that the "things we like or favor" are held together not by vague agreement but also by an undiscussed moral fabric. Presenting the problem as a problem of shoddy writing and vague speech is deceptive. He comes closer when he writes of the jargon:

> *The words serve instead to indicate a kind of group loyalty, an ideological border between our side and the other side: we believe this, and they don't. Or rather: we talk in this way and say this sort of thing; they talk in some other way, and say some other sort of thing.*

Again, agreed, but rather than being concerned with a contrast between jargon that says little and a supposedly attainable speech or writing that is both political and communicative, I respond that the jargon is not just a bad choice, but in some important sense a condition (of being a political subject, our neurotic speech as such; of our time, the Spectacle, about which more later). It is also important to note that what Williams is pointing out here is mainly to be noticed in speech, and only derivatively in writing.

and so on. If we cannot stop saying *accountability*, we might as well call it *guilt*, mismatching behavior and speech. Later this year we can talk about Evil, because the mismatch, the glaring, and, for many, unpleasant contrast, is what is really at stake. *Guilt* is indeed the relatively true feeling or desideratum hidden behind *accountability*, but saying so is worth our while only to disrupt. Our next step in this game should not be to repeat ourselves, but to pass on to the more absurd place. This is the logic of *détournement* and plagiarism, which sidesteps the supposition that one can speak in earnest in such gatherings, meetings, workshops, and so on. This play can also turn ugly, as described in the pamphlet *Cabal, Argot*:

> *When arguing, it is preferential to argue for the sake of being difficult. Semantics are absolutely worth fighting over.*

Being difficult and other ludic, non-serious activities in our speech, playing the replacing-game but doing so backwards and wrong, touting the bad as the good and making the weaker argument the stronger, are the only means we have so long as we remain in a more or less political space. And often enough, we awaken to the fact that we have been forced into such spaces. Fortunately, there are other spaces.

* * *

As I was in the course of writing this essay, an exchange between Kristian Williams and Crimethinc. appeared addressing topics close to what I've been discussing here.[3] Setting out from Orwell's denunciation of vices in political speech and writing, Williams aptly points out a range of words quite similar to what I have been calling margarine-words. About such vague jargon he notes:

[3] See the discussion online, or in the zine *Anarchism and the English Language/ English and the Anarchists' Language*

To Acid-Words

Parts of "To Acid-Words" were first presented at a meeting of the Berkeley Anarchist Study Group in November, 2011. The rest of it was meditated on (and off) for the following two years, with a last burst of effort in early 2014. This is to say that it has layers, strata. It is an attempt to address the tremendous anxiety anarchists seem to have about language, and each of its sub-sections responds analytically to various attitudes towards language in the milieu. I think of it as a necessarily incomplete piece, in that it addresses a relation the anarchist milieu constantly denies in seeking out a better language (instrumental, operational), a pre-language, or a non-language. This relation is, of course, its relation to what it knows as Society. But the relations to language in the milieu, and our collective anxiety towards it, can never be entirely considered apart from more or less discernible social attitudes. Ultimately, although there is nothing to be said in general *about language from an anarchist perspective, it is sometimes worthwhile to trace the lineaments of some particular anarchist attitudes to language, as I have done here. Two caveats: first, this piece is written from a monolingual point of view, as it addresses a largely monolingual milieu. A vastly different approach to these questions could have begun from multilingualism and translation. Second caveat: what is said here about poesy and poetry is delicately presented in a sideways pedagogy, introducing an idea or three to unfortunate readers who have little experience of these. (That, for example, the term I've used for a certain idea of language,* Language*, is also commonly used for a loose school of poets and writers whose works have contributed to inspiring*

precisely the approach I've taken here, is only one of the minor ironies of this essay.)

& so you print your poems
& no one cares
they hate you sometimes
tell you to go to work
like every one else
or they want you to explain
in american, in english,
in old english, in slang
in political, in sexual,
in religious, in psychological,
in revolutionary terms &
language,
  what you meant
& so you hide
take acid
& write an acid poem
or a poem about your city
& say its to increase awareness
of the environment
& its words to expand your
head so you don't have
to take acid
and endanger your life
if it really is dangerous"
— d.a. levy

le militant n'entend pas, ne voit pas le langage et c'est à ce prix qu'il peut militer

[the militant does not hear, does not see language, and this is the price he pays for his militancy]

— Roland Barthes

don't say anymore		***but say***
society		racket
professor	}	cops
psychologist		
poet		
sociologist		
work		hard labor
culture		shit

replacing-game very crudely, to play it backwards instead of forwards, using the wrong word instead of the right one. Recall the Situationist-esque vocabulary that was based on a pretend version of this game:

What I add to these lines—what I place between them—is a kind of enumeration, argumentation through serial juxtaposition: anecdotes and examples, a series of scenes I have been witness to; analysis, thinking through what I heard and saw; references, the things people said, or wrote, and also a way of looking back at what they did not say, or write. And asides for what remained to be noted. I place it all between d.a. levy's positive but dangerous "awareness / of the environment / & its words" and Barthes' two negatives, his thought of a militancy that depends on a denial of language, to show something of the gray space some of us inhabit.

So this is not exactly about anarchists. Nor is it about the society they want to transform, dismantle or destroy. It is about how the society anarchists want to transform, dismantle or destroy transforms, dismantles, or destroys them in the moment of saying what there is to do, of writing what they want or think. And about some ways to resist.

Part 1: Moral

> *I'm quite serious about the need to resist the tyranny of elemental words… They're words that brook no argument, that are intended to be outside of syntax and thus outside of history. I try to resist this when I write.*
> *— Bob Perelman*

How Activists Talk

As I have experienced it, the anarchist milieu (our gray space) is not exclusively or even principally made up of activists. But in the sub-cultural spaces, the social overlaps, and the political neighborhood of the anarchist milieu there is activism, and so there most certainly are activists. It's important to be careful here, because among some anarchists

activist, like *liberal*, is an epithet. The activists I am talking about are both those picked out and ridiculed with such epithets, and, often enough, some less obvious characters. We will only understand activists (and their talk) if we make them strange again, because sometimes they are our friends. They are also us on some days or in the past; they are us though we are in denial about it. Some anarchists are activists and say so; others are activists in denial. Someone said: "activists without the word." Others again aren't activists but bear in their speech and action the inertia of activist approaches and tactics, an entire way of life that shapes what it is to be of the Left in North America and probably elsewhere.

Whoever they are, activists talk at meetings. Of course activists also talk in other situations, but it seems to me that to be an activist is tendentially to reform any situation into a meeting. For example, there are people who only socialize by bringing elements of the meeting into the social situation, at the limit by turning social situations into meetings wholesale. There are rallies and protests and so on, but these have much in common with meetings; one sometimes gets the feeling that everything would be over if the people or institution being protested or rallied against would agree to a meeting. Consequently, the activist utopia is a society assembled out of meeting-atoms, a federation of meetings.

The way activists talk at their meetings is primarily in *margarine-words*. These may be *slogans*, phrases whose function is to circulate, not to mean; or they may be certain *oily words* that slip from mouth to ear, person to machine, situation to scene. One way to recognize margarine-words is repetition: they are used a lot, functioning as code words or passwords, their appropriateness assumed, never shown. Ultimately, this is because their circulation is also the usually unquestioned circulation of moral beliefs; but in any given iteration, the repetition may be well-nigh meaningless, just a little index, gentle reminder of the shared morals rather

its speech seems more like an experiment for a poetry workshop than a political operation.

The advocates of Order retain an arsenal of terms that we use otherwise for their own purposes. They do not erase the word *anarchy*; they rather use it in a way that we feel is either wrong or has the incorrect moral valuation (i.e. responding either *that's not anarchy!* or *that* is *anarchy, and it is good, not bad*). To temporarily attempt to erase a word would be to, temporarily, make it powerful, attractive, interesting… To permanently erase a word? First, words do not show up in the dictionary with the dagger-cross next to them because of anyone's conscious action. That is the great work of collectives, one thing you can count on the masses for: anonymous forgetting… Second, it is preposterous to think the milieu's ban on a word could have any lasting effect on anyone not involved. The milieu (our gray space) is porous, characterized by constant entry and exit; the ban would never work, because it would have to be constantly announced. This repetition would amount to graduating the terms to the status of negatively charged margarine-words.

Beyond these practical problems of usage, *accountability*, like all margarine-words, is not just replaceable by euphemisms, but is itself a stand-in for other words we are more likely to avoid (we *and* the police and their allies) for some reason or another—*guilt*, for example. We can continue to play the game of replacing one word with another while the underlying morality changes very little if at all, and do so for the most part beyond anyone's purview. Our Operation Margarine, or something like it, is probably a major aspect of how these margarine-words get circulated in and out of fashion as they do, part of our larger tennis match with Order, which might be more pessimistically described as Order's tennis match with itself. From the point of view of such pessimism, which is to some extent the necessary point of view of the milieu, perhaps the only way out is to play the

our version has less to do with Myth as ideology, as a confusing veil, and more with that kind of myth we secrete as with a gland in the brain. How stories go; how they turn out… In my story, we saved accountability, ultimately by leaving it as the name for what was to replace accountability. This leaves open the possibility of someone who will see fit to extend its range back from our processes (where it seemed to be more acceptable because now under our control) to the police and their allies (Order), because in saying everything bad we could think about the idea in practice, we left unchanged its status as Good. This has less to do, then, with an incontrovertible master narrative (we were indeed able to say we were against accountability) and more about the slow and silent work of gregariousness and repetition on behalf of a morality it is hard to think of, or outside of.

A conclusion about margarine-words: most of the time our speech cannot separate itself from what has been captured by the category of the Good. When we speak in such a way as to repel away from a word associated with the good (crossing out as "critique"), its magnetic force will attract either that same word, or another, to do very similar work (continuing to use the crossed-out word or a euphemistic variant).

One might well ask what a different outcome for the workshop could have been. Maybe none. Maybe we have them just to state problems. One could well consider that many anarchist gatherings happen primarily to make possible a kind of cathartic venting, especially for those who are less than activists or prefer to avoid meetings, which have their own ritual catharsis. But I doubt this would satisfy most. We move on to ask how to shut down Our Operation Margarine. A radical proposal might have been: let us stop using the terms *justice* and *accountability* Moratorium! What would happen if we really could be disciplined enough to abandon these words, or any of our other margarine-words? Not an escape from myth, or from morality, certainly. For a group to choose to eject a word or words from

than harsh mnemotechnic. It is never really clear which is primary, which gives form to which: the morality at work, or the compulsion to repeat in its collusion with the most gregarious drives. In any case, the meeting (or the rally, etc.) is the pedagogical site where these morals are usually circulated and sometimes, memorably, inculcated. Another way to recognize margarine-words is that, as repeatable units, they can be coded negatively as well as positively, so that avoiding them or using them only as terms of derision becomes as important as using the ones that are to be circulated, owned, and appreciated. That is how we get, for example, "activists without the word," and moralistic immoralists.

To take this analysis one step further and understand what activism really is, we would have to deepen the discussion of the relation between morality and technology, the primitive technics of repetition and circulation, their ever-larger and more sophisticated technological networks, their absorption of ancient codes and modern laws, and so on; that is, discuss *politics*. It is difficult to explain how these two co-operate, because sometimes morality is just that, moral principles and deliberation and tradition and so on; and sometimes I write morality and realize I am talking more about a certain undeliberated obsessiveness, a sort of neurosis of doing the good that neurotically redefines the good as its own neurotic world-view… how all of these levels of neurosis compose modern political subjects is a question to be set aside for now.

Instead, let's leave matters in the realm of family resemblances and generalize for the productive fun of it about how activists use their margarine-words. Afterwards, we will have to thank the activists for making this all so clear, because they are clearly not the only ones who speak in margarine-words. Margarine-words are all of ours when we aren't paying attention; activists are just those who step forward most flagrantly to show us how we all repeat.

ASIDE 1

> Many of the rhetorical effects I designate here as margarine-words are more matters of speech than writing; thus here I concentrate on how some *talk*. The mana-words I turn to further on are best understood as inventions in writing, though they do have a strange orality in *mutant speech*. It turns out that it's when margarine-words are written down that they are most egregious (though careful listening will find them out); and that mana-words sound strangest when spoken as mutant speech. That said, in this essay I will refer to speech and writing more or less interchangeably, as they occur to me.

Activists use margarine-words primarily in two ways. One is the talk of the bureaucrat, the functionary. Sometimes the speaker is not so good at it, so you have to listen a bit more closely to hear the proto-bureaucrat, the proto-functionary learning her role. Even when it is sophisticated, her talk, which on the face of it is common-sensical and even rational, tends in the long run to the obtuse. *She can't make eye contact for looking, or pretending to look, at all the details.* These are the people said to "fetishize process"—but this is usually because what they want can't be said or done in the language of process. To speak in this way is one way to attempt, with varying degrees of success, to instrumentalize language. In part this means to understand and govern the selective circulation of margarine-words. That's the rationality of it, achieved once a critical mass of margarine-words has been circulated, usually re-circulated if those present at the meeting are familiar with or help out in the task. But because it seeks to master people through margarine-words, and not the margarine-words themselves (mastered, they might cease to circulate, or be erased, as one with good taste stops using

> *be furious!' And then one's eyes are opened, one's conscience becomes more pliable, and margarine is a delicious food, tasty, digestible, economical, useful in all circumstances. The moral at the end is well known: 'Here you are, rid of a prejudice which cost you dearly!' It is in the same way that the Order relieves you of your progressive prejudices.*

It should be obvious enough how such a schema is at work in the discourse around the Army or the Church (or all the institutions that resemble Armies and Churches). Extending it to Astra margarine was Barthes' way of saying something about how utterly common of an operation is at work here, how natural or naturalized this inverting or turning-inside-out gesture is. That is where Barthes leaves us, in the diffuse world of advertisements, tiny shreds of propaganda. The calque of Operation Margarine I have been discussing here, ours, if it is a myth, is larval or malformed, probably because, like our politics, it belongs to a different kind of order. Our side is, let's assume, the side of the critics of Order; our speech, often enough, bears or formulates critiques of Order. Our stories, our myths, accordingly, are the stories and myths of Order, critical though their form may be.

ASIDE 3

> This is in part because critique in anarchist circles means more speech against what I don't like than undermining-questioning the grounds of claims. This has a lot to do with why we talk so much about Society.

* * *

Of necessity our Operation Margarine is more curious. We are, most of us, critics of ideology, of Order as such, perhaps, so

take the established value which you want to restore or develop, and first lavishly display its pettiness, the injustices which it produces, the vexations to which it gives rise, and plunge it into its natural imperfection; then, at the last moment, save it in spite of, or rather by the heavy curse of its blemishes.

He calls Operation Margarine a kind of "homeopathy":

one cures doubts about the Church or the Army by the very ills of the Church and the Army. One inoculates the public with a contingent evil to prevent or cure an essential one. To rebel against the inhumanity of the Order and its values, according to this way of thinking, is an illness which is common, natural, forgivable; one must not collide with it head-on, but rather exorcise it like a possession: the patient is made to give a representation of his illness, he is made familiar with the very appearance of his revolt, and this revolt disappears all the more surely since, once at a distance and the object of a gaze, Order is no longer anything but a Manichean compound and therefore inevitable, one which wins on both counts, and is therefore beneficial. The immanent evil of enslavement is redeemed by the transcendent good of religion, fatherland, the Church, etc. A little 'confessed' evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil.

The master-stroke of the essay, which takes us from propaganda or ideology to what Barthes called myth, passes from the initial examples about the Army and the Church to an advertisement for Astra margarine:

The episode always begins with a cry of indignation against margarine: 'A mousse? Made with margarine? Unthinkable!' 'Margarine? Your uncle will

certain phrases, develops a studied silence with respect to the parlance they wish to abandon), this speech is a calculated violence done to language, ignoring aesthetic considerations as well as ethical ones (supposing every morality is the harsh reduction of what was or could have been an ethics). Stories told with margarine-words are moral stories; the moral is what you have to do, or not.

The other way of speaking is more mysterious. At first, it just seems to be the talk of the leader, or would-be leader, his exhortations, but in its sinews it is a kind of hysterical discourse, which perhaps has its origin in the loss of control over the first (bureaucratic) one as margarine-words begin to circulate beyond anyone's control. The speaker realizes at some level, not necessarily conscious, that an ersatz accumulation of margarine-words is powerful, draws attention, generates or at least concentrates energy, so he goes for it, he overdoes it, he says whatever comes to mind as long as it accelerates the recirculation of margarine-words. It is a way of speaking that to an attentive listener (by definition someone not implicated in the activist project at hand) seems so wrong that it is right. Instrumentally right. Here the instrumentalization of language, which always eventually fails, tips over into something much less rational. The leader, like the bureaucrat, manages desire as best he can, but his management also depends on the ability to unleash what is less than rational in speech. This may be done cynically, with an eye to benefit from the ensuing confusion, or in wide-eyed hopefulness, confidence that desire is desire for the good, is itself good. In either case the details get lost, the instrumentalization gets scrambled, gets noisy. *He can't make eye contact for looking, or pretending to look, at the horizon.*

ASIDE 2

> Do activists listen? Not as activists. But they do hear—they hear the exhortations, calls to action.

* * *

I wrote that the details get lost. Suppose, for example, that someone you knew had at some point read a well-known poem, and thought he had found in some of its well-known lines a grand illustration of his sentiments. Suppose that the proof offered was a kind of translation of those lines into margarine-words. Suppose, moreover, that when he explained this to you, it became clear that he had so profoundly misread the lines that, beyond all ordinary questions of interpretation, he could only have arrived at his self-affirming interpretation by unconsciously inverting the traditional and accepted understanding of the lines. It is a kind of wrong that is so patently wrong that it could not subsist without a lengthy justification of reading against the grain, or an absurdist will to reverse all conventional readings. But go on supposing, and suppose that your acquaintance was in no way capable of such experimental reversals. Suppose rather that it were obvious that he thought himself to be in line with the traditional and accepted reading of the lines. How to understand this? He is on one hand so wrong that his illustration by means of the lines simply becomes incoherent. In another, stranger sense, this reading that is so plainly a non-reading shows a peculiar will to instrumentalize the artwork, to seize upon its cultural cachet. Supposing all this, you could have been witness to the ever repeated birth of propaganda. Incidentally, then, a new definition of propaganda: *violent translation of poetry into margarine-words.*

* * *

If we could accede to an impossible situation wherein the instrumental use of language, the circulation of margarine-words, could be paused long enough to examine how morality is at work in it, we would find a collusion in it of moral stories and stories about language itself. As though margarine-words

pauses and hesitations of those who did speak up.) Eventually, everyone was talking about accountability again: not their kind, but our kind; not the bad kind that is ours, but the good kind that could be ours; not fake accountability, but true accountability. Perhaps some felt for a time that it was possible to discard accountability, the slogan, the bad word we had crossed out, and gesture towards the true relation, the word we might eventually just use without crossing it out verbally or otherwise. Around then someone spoke up and said something like:

> *despite all this critique, everyone here has returned to using the word more or less in the way initially questioned and objected to.*

My first thought was: that comfortable circle is one of the ways critique works! Which may as well mean: does not work. Even those who continued to speak against accountability treated it as a reality, gave the word traction, importance as that which we might, we could, maybe should, with great deliberation, refuse, cross out… so that what would replace accountability as a demand or goal needed to be provisionally referred to as… *accountability.*

* * *

The idea of margarine-words occurred to me after that gathering, when I recalled reading an essay by Roland Barthes about a commercial involving a subtle and effective ideological operation. Barthes describes Operation Margarine as a way of "inserting into Order the complacent spectacle of its drawbacks" and suggests that is a "paradoxical but incontrovertible way of exalting" Order.[2] Paradoxically—exalting—order. This is the "schema" he offers of the Operation:

[2] See "Operation Margarine" in *Mythologies.* I have modified the translation. For example, I thought that Order did not need to be qualified by Established.

tal, even as there is a generalized amnesia about how this process works. As a guideline, the demand for ordinary speech is always repeated when people deviate too much from the preferred margarine-words (which, being passwords, get a pass). And this ordinary speech is itself dense with other (older, unknown) margarine-words, the keywords of the society that activists seek to change, that we anarchists want to dismantle, transform or destroy.

Our Operation Margarine

This story is about something that repeats: a loophole, a silent acrobatic maneuver accomplished in the course of political speech.

At an anarchist gathering, I attended a workshop whose stated intent was to question the notions of justice and accountability.[1] *Accountability* is another margarine-word, the use of which that day stretched from the leftist demand for "police accountability" to our own "accountability processes" and their implied moralities—not to mention their interminable slowdowns and failures. The hour or so of discussion went like this: at first, everyone who spoke dared to call police accountability into question, describing it as a reformist slogan, and so on; to a lesser extent, our own use of the word in accountability processes also came into question. For a time it seemed as though no one who spoke wanted any kind of accountability. The word was effectively being crossed out: any positive use began to feel suspect. As the hour wore on, and with no one explicitly recanting their initial statements, a kind of discursive inertia seemed to be doing its slow and even work. (Here we might consider silence: what was not said by the majority of those in the room who did not speak, so the dynamics of the group, the crowd—and the

[1] For context on the discussion, see the zines *The Broken Teapot*, *Accounting for Ourselves*, and *Burning the Bridges They Are Building*

can only circulate on the condition of pushing away any other possibility for speech. Often enough an activist will say something that sounds like

> *what you say is theoretical, abstract. I am without theory; I only speak concretely.*

The proof of this concreteness is orientation to action. Listen, it is the leader, showing the usefulness of his words. Attend to variants of this story long enough and you will eventually discern the moral, which is simple enough. It seems to be:

> *You are bad, you use language to refer to itself; therefore I am good; I use language purposefully, in mind of action.*

At the meeting, an activist is speaking, saying something, but you can't talk about how it is said. What is to be attended to is some content (a plan of action) that is presumably shared. The accusation of abstraction leveled at users of *mutant speech* flows from this situation, since *mana-words* tend to bear the traces of their invention or borrowing more noticeably than the margarine-words preferred by activists. Margarine-words are always ingratiating, seeking to slip by unnoticed. At the meeting sometimes the bureaucrat seems to say:

> *My language is the only good way to refer to these matters; I am using language only in this proper way. You should not use it differently in responding, or suggest that activists might be using it differently in the way they speak.*

Listen, she is preventing deviation from her script.

How is orientation to action—as the criterion of concreteness and propriety—a problem? In two ways: *first*, because *action is usually defined too narrowly*. It is likely to mean a process or event that is interpersonal, public, somehow forceful, often requiring muscular effort, loud, and so on. Which is to say

that it is political, and not infrapolitical, micro-political, anti-political, or apolitical. These sorts of processes or events are adequately modeled, "represented", so the activist supposes, in her language. When it is a theoretical language, it is deployed with an eye to application in practice (which means the kind of narrowly construed political action I've just described); when it is a practical language, it is deployed as almost pure instrumentality: "go there," "do this," etc.

If you question the moral of the story that says you are theoretical and the activist is not, you will meet the push to "do something"—to prove the "this-sidedness" of what you have to say with actions the leader or the bureaucrat will recognize as political.

By now it should be clear that our gratitude to the activists is for showing those of us who are listening how this operation works. At the same time it should be clear that, aside from the activists, there are many, many *actionists*, if by that word I may be allowed to refer to those who define action in roughly the way I have above, whether or not they are activists in terms of their tactics or their morality.

And what is the second problem with orientation to action? Simply put, that *action is not the solution to every situation.* At least I clamor for the perspective wherein action has neither priority nor primacy. Inaction, doing nothing, stopping, quitting, and so on, are not secondary or invalid, morally deficient and politically ineffective though they may appear to the *actionists.*

* * *

The word radical, so often used by activists (but not just them), in our milieu generally means very little other than *good.* Most know the etymological story, which is often repeated at meetings or other instructive scenes and teaches that a radical is one who, given a problem, issue, relation, or situation, gets

language, trimming analysis down to a series of simple presuppositions about which no further discussion is necessary. Would-be militants imitate this minimalism in their brief statements claiming actions.

But if, as Barthes suggests, the militant is a limit-point, the one who does not see language, one could see activists, in their exhortatory and managerial modes, as being just a little bit more aware of language, because they must be more integrated into ordinary speech. Integrated into

> *…the most banal of apparatuses, like a boozy Saturday night among suburban petit bourgeois couples […] it often happens that we experience the characteristic, not request, but possession, and even the extreme possessiveness involved with every apparatus. And it is during the vacuous conversations punctuating the dreadful dinner party that we experience it. One of the Blooms "present" will launch into his tirade against perpetually-on strike-government-workers; once performed (the role being well known), a counter-polarization of the social-democratic type will issue from one of the other Blooms, who will play his part more or less convincingly, etc., etc. Throughout, these aren't bodies speaking to each other, but rather an apparatus functioning. Each of the protagonists sets in motion the series of ready-to-use signifying machines, which are always-already inscribed in common language, in grammar, in metaphysics, in the THEY.*

THEY = SOCIETY, as anarchists use the word. This constant of political speech that is what the *horizontalism* example suggests: there is a minimum consciousness of the experience of language as a raw material to be rendered instrumen-

what I would call the milieu, and *horizontalism* was for negotiating with other activists, or for "the community"—the latter meaning in this case *those to be organized*. The initial conflation makes some amount of sense, as the organizations these activists are a part of were the kind populated by anarchists who do not advertise their anarchism to "the community." Their emphasis on organizing as such made it easy to refer to what was happening as horizontal organizing. Still, it struck me when I realized that with this crowd *horizontalism* had become a euphemism for *anarchism*, a way to mince words at best, at worst to dissimulate or confuse their convictions.

One could perhaps trace this back to Sitrin's decision to translate the adjectival noun *horizontalidad*, literally *horizontality*, which models a state of affairs or a process, as *horizontalism*, the, as she puts it, anti-ism. But it is also a perfect illustration of how those used to margarine-words comfortably adopted *horizontalism* as a way to purposely make their position more vague when engaging in activism, while, in the doing, adding one more note of imprecision to that position.

* * *

Should we distinguish how militants talk and how activists talk? Only to some extent. I have known many less militants than I have activists. It's possible I've never met a militant, only would-be militants, which drives me to say that these folks were a species of activist, not so much in their political opinions or organizational forms but in their general orientation to action—and their relation to language. Tiqqun wrote some instructive pages on militants in *This Is Not a Program*, wherein they emphasize the militants' separation from their communities (activists seek rather to integrate so as to organize). The world of militants is always tendentially the world of secrecy and clandestinity. As if to escape the bureaucratic deployment of language, militants often turn to a completely operational

at its root. A radical claims to think, wishes to act, in terms of the root. A simple illustration. Many years ago someone explained radical feminism to me as that feminism which conceives the subordination of women as the root of all oppression and domination—i.e. that all other asymmetries of power are either directly derived or analogically modeled on this root. Despite the undeniable fact of the subordination of women (easier to affirm than to determine *who* in the last instance is a woman) I found and continue to find it painfully naïve to claim that power could ever be exercised so simply (in one primary or root form with its analogues and derivatives). In this case the radicalism would amount to pursuing, or at least believing, such an analysis (and actively not pursuing or believing others); at a deeper level, it has to do with believing in a certain purchase of analysis (in the especially non-analytic way that activists tend to use this term) on realities of social and other kinds.

One could be more generous to the radicals (or just concede more to what they claim is ordinary usage) and suggest that by getting at the root they mean something more like: discovering the true matrix of relations of force underlying whatever problem, issue, relation, or situation is at stake for them. They would then be radical not in the sense that they seek a root or assume that there is one but in a vaguer sense, implying a kind of downward-seeking motion that we could call looking for basic structures, root-like structures. So a radical does not stop until some component relations of force, the asymmetrical relations of power, have been discovered. It seems to me that this is closer to how *radical* is generally used: those who are habituated to the downward-seeking motion. They speak—by extension: act, move—in characteristic ways. Analysis or theory works for them first as an unveiling, digging up, finding out; then, as a guide to action.

The supposition that what one discovers in the downward-seeking motion is liberatory is perhaps part of what is at stake

in the use of radical more as a noun than as an adjective, or its adjectival use in a sloppy, all-purpose manner, indicating another kind of social identity, meaning roughly *the right kind of activist*, equivalent to *activists like us* or *activists who agree with us*. We pass from repetition to gregariousness. In that mode radical, the adjective, may be coupled with countless activities, situations, places, tasks. What does it add?

It adds a morality, or rather it is an index that a moral code is at stake. As I noted, *radical* is just a synonym for *good*, where what is good is delineated in a largely unspoken and thus unquestioned morality. This might explain such otherwise confusing constructions as:

radical mommy

radical cheerleader

radical stripmall

If we try to understand these constructions according to the first definition I suggested, they are almost incoherent. What is the fundamental or root aspect of being a cheerleader, for example? Whatever it is, a radical cheerleader would be an excellent cheerleader. According to the second sense, what is intended might be something more like this: there are radicals, habitués of the downward-seeking motion, and as such they have earned the right to call themselves and what they do radical. If one of these radicals takes up cheerleading as an activist project, cheerleading, otherwise under suspicion as a practice of mainstream society, becomes radical cheerleading. This means good cheerleading, not as cheerleading but as a suitable activity for a radical. But then radical does not really mean one who goes to the root of cheerleading, but rather one who can make an activity (otherwise under suspicion) good, adjectivally radical, by lending interest and energy to it. It is the valuation associated with the downward-seeking motion. It is

also the value that margarine-words bear as passwords or code-words. Cheerleading can in this sense be recuperated, but this changes nothing about it—the routines, contents of chants, etc. is not what one would claim was at the root! What changes is the "message"—it is now margarine-words as enthusiastically repeated cheers.

Can we say anything different about other instances of "radical" politics?

* * *

In 2006 AK Press published a book called *Horizontalism*. It is sub-titled "voices of popular power in Argentina" and has to do with mutual aid networks and forms of neighborhood and workplace autonomy after the financial collapse in 2001. Marina Sitrin, who edited the book and has done the most to popularize the titular word in Anglophone contexts, writes:

> Horizontalidad *is a living word, reflecting an ever-changing experience. While I have translated it as horizontalism, it is more of an anti-ism. Horizontalism is not an ideology, but more of a social relationship, a way of being and relating.*

Indeed, the oral histories and interviews in the book testify to an extreme suspicion about established politics of any sort. This suspicion, which sometimes spills over into hostility, is manifest among other things in the descriptive term used for the organization of meetings, neighborhood assemblies, occupied spaces, and so on: *horizontalidad*.

It was not long after I read this book that I met a number of activist anarchists who regularly used the term *horizontalism*, in obvious reference to the book, to describe their own practices and those of others. In fact, it seemed that these folks used the terms *horizontalism* and *anarchism* almost interchangeably, except that anarchism was for those in the know,

Alejandro de Acosta
The Impossible, Patience
Critical Essays 2007-2013
2014

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theanarchistlibrary.org

rises unbidden… at the incitement of a power relation that demands your participation. We are still thinking about a mode of relating here—what is called, and is, *and is not*, representation and communication. But the Spectacle is not Language because language *is* representational and informational; the Spectacle is Language *as* representational and informational. Forced communication, excluded communion, botched, endlessly botched, silence.

Interestingly, some version of this approach is also legible in the two aforementioned Situationist essays. If communications councils are their major theme, this is their minor theme. Khayati discusses *détournement* in a way that anticipates the cabalists:

> *The critique of the dominant language, the détournement of it, is going to become a permanent practice of the new revolutionary theory.*
>
> […]
>
> Détournement*, which Lautréamont called plagiarism, confirms the thesis, long demonstrated by modern art, that words are insubordinate, that it is impossible for power to totally* recuperate *created meanings, to fi x an existing meaning once and for all.*

And this *détournement* is itself possible because of the "insubordination of words", which Khayati ties to poetry—not poetry as we know it, but an abolished poetry:

> *Modern poetry (experimental, permutational, spatialist, surrealist or neodadaist) is the antithesis of poetry, it is the artistic project recuperated by power. It abolishes poetry without realizing it, living off its own continual self-destruction.*

The author of "All the Kings' Men" proposes the other available meaning of poetry; in fact, the entire piece is in the main about another way to grasp poetry:

> *What is poetry if not the revolutionary moment of language, inseparable as such from the revolutionary moments of history and from the history of personal life?*
>
> […]
>
> *poetry must be understood as direct communication within reality and as real alteration of this reality. It is liberated language, language recovering its richness, language breaking its rigid significations and simultaneously embracing words and music, cries and gestures, painting and mathematics, facts and acts.*

There is, again, the warning against what is known as poetry:

> *One thing we can be sure of is that fake, officially tolerated poetry is no longer the poetic adventure of its era. Thus, whereas surrealism in the heyday of its assault against the oppressive order of culture and daily life could appropriately define its arsenal as "poetry without poems if necessary," for the SI it is now a matter of a poetry necessarily without poems.*
>
> […]
>
> *Realizing poetry means nothing less than simultaneously and inseparably creating events and their language.*

And how is that to be done? Again, fragmentation-federation… But what concerns me more here is that these

texts come close to the position that, not poetry as we know it, but something importantly akin to it, what I called poesy above, what a writer in *bædan* calls lying, is a kind of primordial activity that can be tapped into or unleashed as the creation of

> *events and their language.*

In a society like ours we do this through *détournement*, understood as a critical, destructive engagement with bureaucratic language or the language of power, a

> *language that cannot and need not be confirmed by any previous or supracritical reference*

The other, corrosive, side of acid-words. Not acid as hallucinatory creativity, but as corrosive, destructive nonsense on the way to silence.

Third option: [someone(?)] and their silence.

* * *

What I have written here concerns language, then, but only sometimes as Spectacle, as Language. Sometimes one is bound to spectacular Language:

> *In analyzing the spectacle we are obliged to a certain extent to use the spectacle's own language, in the sense that we have to operate on the methodological terrain of the society that expresses itself in the spectacle*

wrote Debord. Fortunately there are other things to do than analyze! If I were to remain in the language of Spectacle, I would say that, yes, one can sometimes unbind spectacular representation (and my sense of how that can be done, acid-words,

is indeed closer to a constructed situation than to workers' councils). But, unbinding representation, beyond Language, we do not move beyond language as such. Here we must face our collective anxiety about language. It will still arise unbidden, incited by stranger forces than our human power games. Even in our silence we participate in the semiosis at work in nature. And nature has its own far more ominous silences to which we are not invited. It is possible (which is not to say that it is probable) to use language in a ludic manner; it is also possible to get used by language, to get played by it or be in its play in a way that has nothing to do with being represented or symbolized or representing or symbolizing. Something of that sort was always at work in poesy. And this reciprocal use is related to what the concept of Spectacle intends; in fact, it seems to me to be its sheer possibility (that representation or symbolization presupposes some other kind of language-play, another usage, as work presupposes play or non-work generally).

Read Robert Duncan as he writes about an available shift in attitude,

> *the change from the feeling that poetic form is given to or imposed upon experience—transforming matter into content—to the feeling that poetic form is found in experience—that content is discovered in matter. The line of such poetry is not free in the sense of being arbitrary but free in its search and self-creation, having the care and tension (attention) almost of the ominous…*

Everything I have for the sake of convenience called Language, everything we have (out of what is now almost habit) called Spectacle, corresponds perhaps to the first feeling, which disturbs matter endlessly. It translates the matter of speech (poesy) into a communicable and informational form, botching communion, ruining silence. If it were only a genre, a game to

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opt into, a dream from which we could still awaken… or turn the page on to see what is next in the anthology… By contrast, the feeling that the form is found in experience, and content in matter, allows for the care and tension that are needed to make and share acid-words. Part of their operation is to destroy Language, but this is not what they are for. They are not *for* anything. This is the freedom of the line sensed by some poets, and also what is also ominous in acid-words: in their play they do not deny or elude silence.

> *For words are not thoughts we have but ideas in things, and the poet must attend not to what he means to say but to what what he says means.*

—To turn away from those who, in a doubly hostile gesture, did not care that levy wrote, and later demanded of him to explain what he meant. So you hide, take acid-words… (It is pleasant to imagine Duncan whispering sweetly in levy's ear, calming him momentarily, a kindly apparition in the course of the trip. To remind him he took acid so as not to have to take acid.)

It remains to ask who is capable of saying they are poets, and why. But as that is something to discuss elsewhere, I will return for the destructive fun of it to talking about anarchists.

* * *

There is no reason to bother with saying you are an anarchist or talking to others if you are not seeking another relation to the world, to life, to thinking, and to language. In this essay I have been especially concerned with the relation to language, but all of these relations are implicated, are at stake. The other relation that we are seeking involves a paradox: we are so concerned with ending the relation we *do* have with world, life, thinking, and language that in the undoing of the other

term we are brought to consider the possibility that the relation itself is impossible. I mean that in some sense we cease to think that there is a World at all, that Life can become a pernicious concept, that Thinking is revealed as not being ours or for us. Following this treacherous path it may turn out that there is simply nothing to be said about language itself, about Language. We are left with this strange idea of crossed-out Language instead of a theory or concept of language.

And yet we find many who speak about language in general, assimilating it to Language. They have not earned the fullness of our attention. They would do better to listen than to speak—to attend, that is, to the speech practices of those around them, and eventually to their own words, just as he who says he hates poetry or music is best invited to read or listen and not to further discussion.

That is to say, if a word or phrase is not taken to the limit where it is (at least in passing) shown to be devoid of sense or purchase, then we will remain beholden to a liberal, or relativist, or pluralist sensibility, the hope for better margarine-words or an unmarked and universal ordinary language that all can share in equally. Mana-words sometimes go to the limit, but usually in cabalistic settings. Acid-words always go to the limit: to discover or invent them is to stop repeating, to repeat with a difference, to risk nonsense; and to arrive at nonsense is to approach silence or, often enough, to become silent.

And silence is beyond difference and repetition. * * *

A word is not necessarily the unit through which we encounter language. A phrase or an entire discourse could bring us a happy insight as well. However, *word* is the word I've retained for the insight-catalyst through most of this writing; I think of each one as a shard, a fragment of an impossible Totality, the nothingness of Language. After that happy insight dawns, the discourse, the phrases, and, yes, a little word will each remind you of its own plenitude. Fortunately, such memorabilia are all that remains after acid-words do their delicate

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or grisly work. No hoary nihilist theory of language will appear to conveniently repeat to you what you already silently suspected: that sense is the most fragile matter, a fleeting purchase. However, as a silent accompaniment to the discourse, the phrases, and the little word, maybe there is this nihilist idea of what language is not, *that Language is not*, witness to its dissolution, along with world, life, and thought.

History as Decomposition

"History as Decomposition" was first anonymously published in 2013 in the "journal of collision" Attentat. *I hereby clone it and republish it under the name A. de A., inserted into a middle place in the trilogy I mentioned before "Its Core is the Negation". It is an extension of some of the ideas in a presentation about time for the BASTARD conference in 2012. But that presentation happened before the conception and writing of "Its Core is the Negation", which this essay directly followed. As though, after the schematics of "Its Core", older concerns needed to be restated, reinterpreted. At the same time, almost immediately, the stakes of writing about nihilism began to shift around me: upsurge of the parody I had predicted. In any case, I imagine all of this information might make it possible to read it differently. This is also probably the best place to acknowledge the stimulating company of the Austin Anarchist Study Group; our reading of Perlman was helpful in articulating my ideas. They are present elsewhere in this collection as well.*

§ 1

Supposing the word is in one's vocabulary, it is easy enough to dismiss others as nihilists in deed or in intention. Like *atheist*, the term first appeared as an accusation. Used in this traditional manner, it is a simple way to pathologize your enemies. Many dedicate their time to this kind of symptomatic hand-wringing. It places your enemies in accepted moral scripts that redefine them in a range from careless to evil. It is more difficult, but hardly a great feat in itself, to declare oneself a nihilist. In its

The Impossible

Another name for that peace could be *silence*. I am pleased by the idea that these essays, to the extent that they succeed in showing the hollowness of certain forms of speech (journalistic prose, slogans, activist talk, the rhetoric of progress, the imagination of hope), do so not so much replace it with a full and true speech (though I do want to practice a speech that is both analytical and free) as they gesture towards the silence in all speech—a silence that, here and now, I can only explain as a void that we all, in our stupidest, most gregarious moments, as we constitute a society, abhor, conceal, and deny.

The Beautiful Idea

For a long time I have known that I have nothing to say about it in general. I wonder now if I have anything left to say about it at all. "Without adjectives" was for a time a good enough way of marking that, but things are both stupider and more complicated now, so the explicit use of partisan, subcultural, and generally group designators is most wisely kept to an absolute minimum. Its name was the only tolerable slogan, the most concentrated one; now I, we, will have to do without it. Another sense of silence.

Conclusion: Silence

Away, a way

I have witnessed and experienced for myself the salutary effects of certain subtractive practices documented as far back as Zhuangzi, and probably carried out more or less everywhere civilization has appeared (even if the documentation is usually missing or not as well written as the *Inner Chapters*). It would seem that there are two forms to this resistance: *running away*, and *doing nothing*. Between them is a kind of tactical neutrality of the apolitical or amoral sort. As to running away, I have become increasingly pensive as to whether there is any place one could exit to that is not first cleared out with fire.

Some consider that such heterotopias are only cleared out in a few, utterly combative, ways. I say that somewhere between impatience and spectacle, many of us became fascinated with the language of war (social war, etc.). I find this language and its attendant practices tiresome and limiting, as tiresome and as limiting as the language and practices of activism and Revolution. One has to be true to one's temperament and one's masks (*ēthos anthrōpōi daimōn*); and, though I am no pacifist, I do think the slowdown evident in my essays is a sign of the search for an admittedly impossible peace. Peace as what comes after, and therefore what is not, what is attractive because it is not.

simplest form, this is to perversely and excessively embrace being dismissed as a badge of difference and pride. In a more developed form, it is to argue and act from a range of positions we currently recognize mostly by slogans of the "no future"/"everything must be destroyed" sort. A more difficult variant of the embrace of the term is one that claims it drives a wedge between two kinds of nihilism. Whether they are posited as two visions of the Void or different methods of destruction (moral and anti-moral, social and anti-social), this version of the nihilist position is ultimately descended from a distinction made by Nietzsche between active and passive nihilism. But the Nietzschean inheritance is double: there is the above-mentioned wedge position; and there is the diagnostic sense of nihilism. The latter suggests understanding a condition psychologically, as Nietzsche did in his late notebooks, or metaphysically, as Heidegger did in his Nietzsche seminars. Such attempts to diagnose render very difficult the separation of the thinker and the thinking, the writer and the writing, from the condition (which may be understood as a corrosive phenomenon variously affecting a place, a time, a culture, a civilization, an empire, and so on).

Now and then the diagnostic sense reappears, severed from the wedge-distinction. In recent years some have taken up the diagnosis of the nihilistic society as the most powerful tool of a kind of critical theory (and, probably unbeknown to them, a contemporary echo of the traditional use of *nihilist* as an accusation). At the same time, others have taken up the wedge, severed from the diagnosis, as their way of distinguishing a nihilist position that is able to act in a space clear of social implosion.[1] By that I mean: to distinguish the destructive action that comes from agents in the milieu (or our presumed allies)

[1] Two examples in terms of recent writing in the anarchist space would be *Whitherburo*, for the first, and the "Editorial Statement" in *Lawless*, for the second.

from the self-destruction, implosion and dissolution, of social forms and probably of society in general. Both are done with too much ease precisely to the degree that they ignore each other.

There are a few of us, at least, for whom nihilism is a vital problem in a way that exceeds the action of the wedge and the contemplation at work in the diagnosis. It is something I feel I have to think through, as well as live out; and neither of the above ways of understanding it seems sufficient. I suspect that this means that the problem is not what it was. (Or at least that, like Nietzsche, I feel implicated in the diagnosis.) We are not satisfied with lining up the conditions and our position, saying: our epoch (dominant moralities, culture, civilization, etc.) are nihilistic, and so are we—as if we were merely expressing the disintegration around us as theory or as smashy. Even to say that there is a general tendency and that some *we* is pushing it farther, driving it to its limit, etc. sounds perilously close to the old Communist idea of exploiting the contradictions of capitalism so as to overcome it. The question always remains as to whether that *we*, at the farthest reach, at the limit, is not doing the innovative work that future systems will be built upon. From this questioning **we may take "no future" and "everything must be destroyed" less as slogans of a supposedly self-evident sort and more as dark mottos** that guide our explorations of a complicated and dangerous terrain.

§ 2

I begin with the wedge position, not the isolated diagnosis, because I feel closer to it. But I also need to set out what separates me from it, since I do not understand by what criterion one could claim to clearly distinguish what is on either side of the wedge.

a space-time (really a series of places-moments, some of them taking place ever so briefly) where one can register, to some extent, what ideas have traction in our lives. *Desert*'s explicit statements are certainly more pedestrian than Thacker's theory; but the downside to Thacker's exciting flights of intellectual fancy, at least from where I am writing, is that it is hard to know who he is speaking to, or about, much of the time. One imagines that people do gather to hear what he has to say, or read his books in concert. I do wonder to what extent they consider themselves to be a community, a potential community, a crossed-out community.

Post scriptum bis. I mentioned solitude. It would also be worthwhile to think about friendship along these lines.

goal of dismantling the milieu as anarchist identity machine. Being witness to the nameless thing, to the unthinkable life or Planet or Cosmos, is not a goal. It is not a criterion of anything, either. It is more like a state, a mystical, poetic state (though in this state I am the poem). It is the climatological mysticism Thacker describes and *Desert* hints at for an anarchist audience, both deriving in their own way from the weird insight that *the Planet is indifferent to us.* So read *Desert* again as an allegory of the self-destruction of the milieu, of any community that, as it runs from its norms, places new, unstated norms ahead of itself. Such is the slippage from green nihilism to cosmic pessimism, which gives us occasion to continue speaking of chaos. Well, one might say that I have merely imported some alien theory into an otherwise familiar (if not easy) discussion. Of course I have. My aim, however, was not to apply it, but to show in what sense one play that is often acted out in our spaces may be anti-politically theorized, which is to say cosmically psychoanalyzed. Our place is not to apply the theory of cosmic pessimism (or any other theory; that is not what theory is, or is for); our place is to think, to continue speaking of chaos, not being stupid enough to think we can take its side. There are no sides. We might come to realize that we, too, in our attempts to gather, organize, act, change life, and so on, were playing in the world, ignorant of the Planet, its *unimaginable weirdness.*

> *If the earth must perish, then astronomy is our only consolation*
> — Joubert

Post scriptum. I mentioned community in passing. Most anarchists I converse with regularly treat the word delicately or dismissively, either ignoring it altogether, putting it in quotation marks, or virtually crossing it out. I suppose that crossed-out sense of community is another name for the milieu. As crappy as it is most of the time, I will admit that the milieu is

> *Our nihilism is not christian nihilism.*
> *We do not deny life*

wrote Novatore, who, inspired by *The Antichrist*, was perhaps able to live out or live with the wedge position. Well, as with much of what he wrote, I am inclined to say that I share his perspective, but with a superadded sense of uncertainty. The uncertainty arises from a sense of impossibility, the impossibility gaining the proper distance from society, Humanity,

> *… the collective tempests and social hurricanes …*

insofar as today this society-weather is a technological issue and not merely a spiritual one. —Did I write *spiritual*? I might as well have written psychological, or mental, or referred to character, taste or temperament. All I have done here is enumerated the beginning of a list of phenomena that we only know in their ruination, or, in political terms, in and as their complicity with mass phenomena. Or, in ethical terms, through their betrayal.

I may well deny life, if life is unlivable: narcotic life, cyborg life. And the nihilist position we both claim and seek—for us it is never simply *not* Christian, just as our atheism echoes the atheism of those raised with religion. A certain kind of transition is at stake:

> *By becoming aware of spectacular decomposition, a person of* ressentiment *becomes a nihilist. Active nihilism is prerevolutionary. There is no consciousness of transcendence without consciousness of decomposition. Juvenile delinquents are the legitimate heirs of Dada*

wrote Vaneigem. Here the wedge is something else: not their nihilism and ours, but nihilism as consciousness, active nihilism as the transition between *ressentiment* and revolution;

the tempting idea that the symptom will become the cure. I do think one can describe the difference between active nihilism and passive nihilism as an awareness. I do think that awareness matters in terms of how one might live beyond *ressentiment* and beyond the spectacle of society. But I must part ways when it comes to describing awareness as prerevolutionary (or, for that matter, anyone as the legitimate heirs of Dada, tongue in cheek or not).

Some of us need to experience the full consequences of this parting of ways. This means to show and to witness what the awareness of decomposition is *now* or *to us*, and what it contributes to stating the problem of nihilism as some of us understand it. **What is most dramatic in this new understanding is the tension between realizing that this is a new understanding, one that is of our time, and simultaneously that we are grasping to what extent the question of nihilism has become detached from a historical understanding.**

§ 3

Of the definitions offered in the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, two are notable for their recent underemployment: *unitary urbanism* and *decomposition.*[2]

[2] The definitions have had remarkably different fates. *Situation/situationist/situationism* have been discussed on and off as needed (now and then some of us enjoy pointing out the third of these to those that need a clarification). *Psychogeography/psychogeographical/psychogeographer* have, for better or for worse (probably for worse) turned out to be the most harmless of the bunch, leading to a variety of popularizations in contexts often disconnected from the rest. Of the two usually untranslated terms, the fate of *dérive* has been tied to the psychogeography bundle, though I'm not sure it had to be. *Détournement* has also inspired both popular (cute) and unpopular (perverse) forms. The Great Web entertains with plenty of both; neither has any lasting importance.

versation one often overhears in the company of anarchists. Someone is discussing something they prefer or are inclined to do, and doing so in increasingly positive terms. Another person points out (functioning of the anarchist identity machine) that there is nothing specifically anti-capitalist or radical about the stated activity or preferred object, reducing it verbally to another form of consumption. Anxious hours are passed this way. About such inclinations I prefer to say that we do not know if they come from above or below; we know our own resistance, and not much more. That resistance manifests in unknowable ways, obeying no conscious plan. It could well be a particularly fancy kind of neurosis; but *survival* means just this, that we do not know the way out of the situation and we must live here with the idea of anarchy. Another way to put this is that if our rejection of society and state is as complete as we like to say it is, our project is not to create alternative microsocieties (scenes, milieus) that people can belong to, but something along the lines of becoming monsters. It is probable that anarchy has always had something to do with becoming monstrous. The monster, writes Thacker in another of his books, is *unlawful life,* or *what cannot be controlled.* It seems to me the only way to do this, as opposed to saying one is doing it and being satisfied with that, would be to unflinchingly contemplate the thing we are without trying to be, the thing we can never try to be or claim we are: *the nameless thing,* or *unthinkable life.* Which is also the *solitary* thing, or the *lonely* one. The egoist or individualist positions are like dull echoes of the inexpressible sentiment that I might be that nameless thing, translated into a common parlance for the benefit of a (resistant, yes) relation to the social mass. That the cosmos is not our natural home is a thought outside the ways in which we might survive here. To say we survive instead of living is in part to say that we have no idea what living is or ought to be (that there is probably no ought-to about living). But also that we resist any ideal of life, including our own. Becoming monstrous is therefore the

a single place, in which all involved would have to put up with each other for a few hours, let alone live together) that the contradiction unfolds. Some form of *we have enemies* is the great rallying for a wide array of active agents, from the remains of the Left to advocates of social war. And some form of *we did this to ourselves* is in the background of all sorts of moralizing approaches to oppression and interpersonal damage, but also the more misanthropic strains of primitivism. I would also argue that a modified form of it informs the deep background of egoism and some forms of individualism (splitting the forced *we* from the atomic *ourselves).* My question is, what happens if we zoom out farther? Here the virtue of invoking science as *Desert* does may be visible. For what is beyond history (the time of the World) and prehistory is geologic time, the time of the Planet, which leads us to cosmic time. There is a difference between invoking science and practicing or praising it. The latter simply produce more science. The former may be a way to encounter what our still humanist politics ignore. From the perspective of cosmic time, the contradiction does not dissolve (at least not for me); but its moral or political character seems to unravel. Something less centered on *us* emerges. Perhaps both stories—the story about enemies and the story about ourselves—ignore something much more disturbing than mere accidental guilt or immorality, something that disturbs us precisely because it is the disturbing of humanity. ("It is not man who colonizes the planet, but the planet and the cosmos who transgress the lonely threshold of man"—does this odd sentence of Laruelle's express the thought here, I wonder?) It makes sense for Thacker to invoke mysticism when he considers the cosmos or the Planet, because its otherness has most often been referred to as divine, and related to as a god. Now, that need have nothing to do with religion, especially if we identify religion with revelation; but mysticism is a good enough approximation to the attitude one takes towards a now decentered life. I call that attitude a thoughtful kind of *survival.* This is closely connected to a con-

> Unitary urbanism: *The theory of the combined use of arts and techniques as means contributing to the construction of a unified milieu in dynamic relation with experiments in behavior.*

This is the most noticeably obsolete of the situationist definitions. It suggests to those familiar with the early SI the exploration of the city as the setting for the practices of constructing situations, psychogeography, and the wandering they called *dérive.* The city figures here as a "unified milieu." If unitary urbanism has been abandoned, it is because that side of the SI was not of much use to anyone—to the popularizers *or* the inheritors. Tom McDonough explicates the project competently enough:

> *There was, in fact, a curious strain of situationist thought, little remarked today, that was precisely concerned with the destruction of the subject, with the vision of a new, malleable humanity. This vision was particularly apparent in early discussions of the construction of situations and the linked problem of unitary urbanism, both of which were conceived as means of inciting new behaviors, and as such would have access to all the methods offered by modern technology and psychology. That peculiar neologism, "psychogeography," conveyed exactly this desire for rational control over ever greater domains of life.*

Just a strain. But the popularizers were never concerned with such dramatic changes to our lives. And the inheritors—here I mean those who, like Fredy Perlman, translated and expanded on the ideas of the SI— understood sooner or later, if not immediately, that this strain represented a wager the SI played and lost. The side of the optimistic, the historically rational in the SI—the defense, therefore, of progress, a possible

progress buried but to be unearthed (a common enough story for communists and many anarchists, of course)—was ravaged by historical and political events. Without entering into a detailed discussion, I think it is fair enough to say that the last fifty years have been all about "inciting new behaviors" and the confluence of "modern technology and psychology." In some inverted sense, unitary urbanism was realized—by its enemies.

Decomposition, on the other hand: who has really thought this idea through? In one sense the definition seems to belong to the same strain of Situationist thought that opted for unitary urbanism.

> Decomposition: *The process in which traditional cultural forms have destroyed themselves as a result of the emergence of superior means of controlling nature which make possible and necessary superior cultural constructions. We can distinguish between the active phase of the decomposition and effective demolition of the old superstructures—which came to an end around 1930—and a phase of repetition that has prevailed since that time. The delay in the transition from decomposition to new constructions is linked to the delay in the revolutionary liquidation of capitalism.*

The first sentence certainly appeals to the same sense of progress. Such progress would be predicted and measured according to "superior means of controlling nature" (in French the phrase is *domination de la nature*). As the means appear, cultural forms destroy themselves, a necessary sacrifice, one might suppose, for progress to carry on. In the most immediate sense, which relates decomposition to art movements, this corresponds to the

> *active and critical*

> *To survive, not to live, or, not living, to maintain oneself, without life, in a state of pure supplement, movement of substitution for life, but rather to arrest dying…*
> — Blanchot

… deserting life.

* * * *

A desert and not a garden: one remarkable aspect of the contemporary anarchist space is an open contradiction between two perspectives on what struggle is, or is for, that might be summed up in the phrases *we have enemies* and *we did this to ourselves*. There are countless versions of this contradiction, which at a deeper level is really not about political struggle at all, but about the essence of resistance. One version is the condemnation of the notion of enemy as a moral notion, and another is its silent return in the emphasis on friendship and affinity; there is also what a book called *Enemies of Society* may be taken to suggest from its title on. The contradiction surfaces most clearly in discussions influenced by primitivist positions or ones hostile to civilization, likely because of the tremendous temporal compression they require to make their case. In such talk, we zoom out from lifetimes and generations to a scale of tens of thousands of years. The enemy appears within the course of history, but the *fact* of the appearance of the enemy, the split in humanity, summons the second *we*, because of the need to presuppose a whole species in some natural state (balance, etc.) that, in the event or events that open up the panorama of civilization and history, cleaves itself into groups or at least roles. The positions we know better tend to revolve around trivialized versions of these perspectives, never really experiencing the tension between them. It is only in the play of the anarchist space as a whole (and precisely because it is not

cause of Revolution in several places. One could say this adds up to a kind of political retreat. One could also say, however, that some are too used to reading political texts that always end on a loud and vindictive note! No, this is where the question of rethinking survival from an anti-political perspective inflected by something like Thacker's cosmic pessimism or reinvented mysticism is critical. We make survival primary, not so much inverting Vaneigem's inversion of the norm in societies like ours, but rather by noticing what in our conception of life has always been a kind of religion or morality of life, easy adjustment to a familiar nature. Whatever its faults, *Desert* was written to say that such a conception is no longer useful, and that one useful meaning of anarchist is someone who admits as much. Can that meaning fit with the subcultures that most of today's anarchists compose? Probably not. The subcultures exist as pockets of resistance, of course; but survival in them is indelibly tied to reproducing the anarchist as persona, as identity, as an answer to the question of what life is or is for. To make sense or have meaning this answer presupposes the workings of our homegrown identity-machine, our collective, repeated minimal task of discerning about actions whether they are anarchist or not, and, by extension, whether the person carrying them out is anarchist. It is our way of bringing the community into the desert. Announcement of one's intentions to overcome the limits of subculture and reach out to others, or inspire them with our actions, is not different than, but rather a crucial part of, this operation. Survival, in the sense *Desert* suggests it to me, is something completely different, for in it any social group or kin network, as it attempts to live on, cannot draw significant lines of difference (of identification, therefore) between itself and others. It melts into a humanity collectively resisting death. Needless to say this is something entirely different than the revolutionary process as it has been imagined and attempted. There is no future to plan for, only a present to survive in, and that is the implosion of politics as we have known it.

destruction of forms (so wrote Anselm Jappe) that came to a head with Dada but could include Impressionism, Symbolism, Futurism, Cubism, and so on. What follows troubles this interpretation, however. It seems that "around 1930" everything was marching according to plan. Since then decomposition carries on as

> *empty repetition,*

(Jappe again) which would mean that cultural forms farcically continue to destroy themselves without any "new constructions."

> *The decomposition of artistic forms has thus become perfectly concordant with the real state of the world and retains no shock effect whatsoever.*

In other words, the eternal return of an Art that was declared dead countless times—its repeated resuscitation by the market. This dynamic of repetition is referred to a "delay" in the "liquidation" of capitalism. The dynamic of decomposition in the arts is coupled with the impasse in urbanism in the "Basic Program of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism":

> *The development of the urban milieu is the capitalist domestication of space. It represents the choice of one particular materialization, to the exclusion of other possibilities. Like aesthetics, whose course of decomposition it is going to follow, it can be considered as a rather neglected branch of criminology*

wrote Vaneigem and Kotányi. The necessary question is why one will follow the other. (A provisional answer is that the unity of the phenomena under investigation is revealed when one notices that separate spheres are decomposing in the same way. It could also be that it is in the realm of

aesthetics that the awareness of decomposition is greatest, and that the awareness accelerates the process, so that other separated spheres of life must follow it, at least for now.)

What decomposition seems to mean so far is that if material conditions do not improve along the lines of true progress, culture breaks down. It changes, yes; but these changes are to be understood as a self-dismantling, and then the indefinite repetition of that self-dismantling. When Vaneigem composed his enumeration of "Theoretical Topics That Need To Be Dealt With Without Academic Debate or Idle Speculation," he included

> *Dialectics of decomposition and supersession in the realization of art and philosophy but*

there is room to question whether what is under consideration here has a dialectical structure when the supersession (*dépassement*) never comes. **Decomposition can be provisionally interpreted as the invocation of an ethico-political ideal against an aesthetic one, the refusal of the new in art, or even the refusal of art as such, insofar as, in its separated existence, it cannot act on the economy, cannot alter material conditions. But it can also be seen as a way of beginning to understand the "delay" from within the "delay"; and in that sense already suggests the refusal of the production of the new in every sphere when we are aware that it is empty repetition.**

§ 4

This tension between longing for supersession, if not progress, and refusal of the present can be detected everywhere the term was used by Debord—already, for example, in three proto-Situationist texts of 1957. "One Step Back," published in the journal *Potlatch*, opens by invoking

life or nature that we can refer to. The perspective I am developing here suggests that we have no way of knowing what we are or should be, and that the wild is better conceived as that no-way, as the conditions that push back against our best effort to define ourselves, identify our selves, or know our world. Similarly, what is wild in us can only be conceived (though it is not really conceivable in the long run) as what resists, what pushes back, against any established order. But this might be closer to survival than to life. Survival has a positive value in that it is itself an activity, a set of nontrivial practices that refer back to life insofar as we know it. We survive as we can, not confident that we are living. It is this aspect of *Desert* that some insurrectionaries seem to have disagreed with, in that it often talks of plans for survival where they would have preferred to see plans for action, or at least calls to action. We can read there of

> *An Anarchism with plenty of adjectives, but one that also sets and achieves objectives, can have a wonderful present and still have a future; even when fundamentally out of the step with the world around it. There is so much we can do, achieve, defend and be; even here, where unfortunately civilisation probably still has a future.*

It is passages like this one, towards the end of the pamphlet, that probably left some with the impression that its author is still attached to hope, and left others with the sense of a form of survival that still somehow resembled activism more than attack. As for the former impression, that would be to confuse the climate pessimism of *Desert* with a kind of overarching and mandatory mood, as though those who had this view were of necessity personally depressed or despondent. There is no evidence for such a conclusion. As for the latter, it is a little more complicated. Yes, the author of *Desert* often sounds like someone addressing activists; and, yes, *Desert* explicitly rejects *the*

> *those who would profit from the present or attempt to plan the future. Yet the functioning of the Earth System is destructive as well as bountiful and it is not a conscious god with an interest in preserving us or its present arrangement—something we may find out if the Earth is now moving to a new much hotter state.*

For his part, Thacker concludes his book by discussing a mysticism of the unhuman, what he calls a *climatological mysticism*. It is a way of thinking, and paradoxical knowing, modeled on religious mysticism rather than scientific knowledge. But it is not reducible to the former. He writes,

> *there is no being-on-the-side-of the world, much less nature or the weather. […] the world is indifferent to us as human beings. Indeed, the core problematic of the climate change issue is the extent to which human beings are at issue at all. On the one hand we as human beings are the problem; on the other hand at the planetary level of the Earth's deep time, nothing could be more insignificant than the human. This is where mysticism again becomes relevant.*

This attitude of nonknowledge, as Bataille would have put it, informs life even as it decenters it. That the Earth is our place, but the planet does not care about us and the cosmos is not our home, is a thought of the ways in which we might survive here. Some will remember Vaneigem's repeated contrast between *vie* and *survie*, life and survival. For him it was a matter of inverting the accepted, and to a large extent enforced, view in which one must survive first and live second. Some of this view seems to have been taken into the perspective that identifies life and nature, where the latter is understood as what we are or should be—that is, that there is something normative about

> *The extreme point reached by the deterioration of all forms of modern culture, the public collapse of the system of repetition that has prevailed since the end of the war…*

and on this basis warns:

> *Undoubtedly the decision to make use, from the economic as from the constructive viewpoint, of retrograde fragments of modernism entails serious risks of decomposition*[3]

The risk being to participate in decomposition (as opposed to contesting or undoing it) by hanging on to the creations of the past, now shattered by that decomposition into fragments. "One More Effort If You Want to Be Situationists" is notable for its parenthetical subtitle, "The SI *in* and *against* Decomposition":

> *The Situationist International exists in name, but that means nothing but the beginning of an attempt to build beyond the decomposition in which we, like everyone else, are completely involved. Becoming aware of our real possibilities requires both the recognition of the presituationist—in the strict sense of the word—nature of whatever we can attempt, and the rupture, without looking back, with the division of labor in the arts. The main danger lies in these two errors: the pursuit of fragmentary works combined with simpleminded proclamations of an alleged new stage.*

[3] Parenthetically, this text accuses members of the Lettrist International of "a certain satisfied nihilism", presumably deploying the term in its isolated diagnostic sense.

At this moment, decomposition shows nothing more than a slow radicalization of moderate innovators toward positions where outcast extremists had already found themselves eight or ten years ago. But far from drawing a lesson from those fruitless experiments, the "respectable" innovators further dilute their importance. I will take examples from France, which surely is undergoing the most advanced phenomena of the general cultural decomposition that, for various reasons, is being manifested in its purest state in western Europe.

Most of those who would have spoken of progress in 1957 would have said it was farthest along in Western Europe or the United States! So decomposition is clearly a place-holder for progress-delayed. The article contrasts the bleak terrain of what "decomposition shows" with the description of the nascent group as the "beginning of an attempt to build beyond it"—beyond what it shows. That same year, the booklet *Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency*, presented by Debord at the founding conference of the SI, significantly broadens the sense of the term. In some places it seems we are still asked to think about what is a dead end in art. In others, though, it seems **we are being asked to consider the dead end of culture itself:**

Decomposition has reached everything. We no longer see the massive use of commercial advertising to exert ever greater influence over judgments of cultural creation; this was an old process. Instead, we are reaching a point of ideological absence in which only the advertising acts, to the exclusion of all previous critical judgments—but not without dragging along a conditioned reflex of such judg-

the desert in the third sense. Now, this apparently closed-loop operation could be the inevitable repetition of some ancient anthropogenic trauma. Or it could be (we just can't know here and now) the sane, wild reaction to Civilization: desperate attempt to return to the Earth (our bright home) via the dark indifference of the Planet or Cosmos. Of this return pessimism says: you will need to do it again and again. Is the pessimism about a condition we can escape, or one we can't? Is it the anti-civilization pessimism of the most radical ecology, or is it despair, no less trivial for being a psychological insight, before the morbid obtuseness of humans? We just can't know here and now. Masciandaro, Thacker's fellow commentator on Laruelle, aptly terms this "the positivity and priority of opacity"—the opacity of the Planet and the Cosmos, Laruelle's black universe.

O the dark, the deep hard dark
Of these galactic nights!
Even the planets have set
Leaving it slab and impenetrable,
As dark and directionless
As those long nights of the soul
The ancient mystics spoke of.
Beyond there is nothing,
Nothing we have known or experienced.
— John Cotton

* * * *

In *Desert* we read:

Nature's incredible power to re-grow and flourish following disasters is evident both from previous mass extinctions and from its ability to heal many lands scarred by civilisation. Its true power is rarely considered within the sealed, anthropocentric thinking of

In what passes for a moon
On the galactic periphery,
Here is an austere beauty,
Barren, uncompromising,
Like that which must have been
Experienced by men
On the ice-caps and deserts
As they once existed on earth
Before their urbanization
Harsh and unambiguous…
— John Cotton

World-desert: the desert grows…
Earth-deserts: they are growing, too.
Cosmic deserts: *on the galactic periphery…* In a response to François Laruelle's *Du noir univers*, Thacker elaborates on the various senses of the desert motif, suggesting both that it is the inevitable image and experience of the Planet, as a slice of the Cosmos, or what Laruelle calls the black Universe, and that it is a mirage, that there is no real desert to escape to. Hermits keep escaping to the desert, but their solitude is temporary; others gather nearby. The escape from forced community develops spontaneous forms of community. But for being spontaneous, such community does not cease to develop, sooner or later, the traits of the first, escaped, community. The issue for me is double: first, that to the two senses invoked in *Desert* (the literal ecological sense, and the sense of desertion) we may now add the third corresponding to the Planetary or Cosmic view, the desert as the impossible, as nothingness. Second, the ethical, psychological, or at least practical insight that some keep deserting society, civilization, or what have you in the direction of the desert and, as stated, sooner or later populating it, inhabiting it, somehow living or at least surviving in it. Even if these deserters headed towards the desert in the first sense, they were motivated or animated by the impossible target of

ment.
[…]
The history of modern culture during the ebb tide of revolution is thus the history of the theoretical and practical reduction of the movement for renewal, a history that reaches as far as the segregation of minority trends, and as far as the undivided domination of decomposition.

§ 5

Look at "Theses on Cultural Revolution," a piece that Debord published in *Internationale Situationniste* 1 (the same issue as the definitions). The fifth thesis begins:

> *We are excluded from real control over the vast material powers of our time. The communist revolution has not yet occurred and we are still living within the confines of decomposing old cultural superstructures.*

The seventh thesis adds:

> *The practical task of overcoming our discordance with this world, that is, of surmounting its decomposition by some more advanced constructions, is not romantic.*

For Debord decomposition was always a cultural phenomenon. Faced with art objects, mass media contents, and with their commodity-forms, the situationist would only respond that they were to be seen as the products of decomposition. I think this illuminates the accompanying definitions: *détournement* is a way to refuse to produce new decomposing art, provisionally turning decomposition against itself by

rearranging existing elements; *dérive* and psychogeography are techniques for wandering in, and analyzing, cities that one has no idea how to transform, in search of the elements to be transformed. These are the practices of "building beyond" decomposition. All of this unfolds in a larger "presituationist" historical framework in which "the communist revolution has not yet occurred."

Not yet… Almost ten years later, Debord did not make much of decomposition in *Society of the Spectacle*. He mentions in a few theses in the context of cities and in the context of the implosion of modern art. More or less the original context and usage, then:

> *The mutual erosion of city and country, resulting from the failure of the historical movement through which existing urban reality could have been overcome, is reflected in the eclectic mixture of their decomposed fragments that blanket the most industrialized regions of the world.*

As is well known, although the communist revolution had "not yet" occurred in 1967, either, *Society of the Spectacle* did include some proposals as to how to bring it about. For many, the way in which the book has continued to be important is in its theory of spectacle and separation, which could be considered a way to understand decomposition writ large. The counterbalancing notions of "cultural" resistance, *détournement*, *dérive*, and situation are only hinted at in its theses, while a great emphasis is placed on the worker's councils, which were to bring about the revolution that had "not yet" occurred…

Around the same time, Vaneigem raised a more troubling question:

> *In the end, by dint of identifying ourselves with what we are not, of switching from one role to another, in relation to the state. By contrast, in the 19th century a shift occurs towards the theological notion of immanence… which likewise correlates to "the democratic thesis of the identity of the ruler and the ruled." In these and other instances, we see theological concepts being mobilized in political concepts, forming a kind of direct, tabular comparison between cosmology and politics (God and sovereign ruler; the cosmos and the state; transcendence and absolutism; immanence and democracy).*

The closed loop of politics:

> *The republic is the only cure for the ills of the monarchy, and the monarchy is the only cure for the ills of the republic.*
> — Joubert

Thacker's question follows: what happens to this analogy, which structures both political theory and ordinary thinking about politics to some extent, if one posits a world that is not, and will never be, entirely revealed and knowable? The closed loop is opened, and the analogy breaks down. *What happens when we as human beings confront a world that is radically unhuman, impersonal, and even indifferent to the human? What happens to the concept of politics…* It seems to me that a question of this sort is lurking in the background of *Desert* as well.

* * * *

The desert may be, or sometimes seem to be, what is left after a catastrophic event, but it has also always been with us, as image and reality.

the hopes, desires, and struggles of human individuals and groups. Its limit-thought is the idea of absolute nothingness, unconsciously represented in the many popular media images of nuclear war, natural disasters, global pandemics, and the cataclysmic effects of climate change. Certainly these are the images, or the specters, of Cosmic Pessimism, and different from the scientific, economic, and political realities and underlie them; but they are images deeply embedded in our psyche nonetheless. Beyond these specters there is the impossible thought of extinction, with not even a single human being to think the absence of all human beings, with no thought to think the negation of all thought.

Now the intention of my *or* will be clear for some (from the psyche to the cosmos…). In *Dust* Thacker does not draw many connections between his ideas and politics, so it is worthwhile to examine one of the places where he illustrates the paradox his view of the Planet opens up in that space. He cites Carl Schmitt's suggestion, in *Political Theology*:

the very possibility of imagining or re-imagining the political is dependent on a view of the world as revealed, as knowable, and as accessible to us as human beings living in a human world. … But the way in which that analogy [from theology to politics] *is manifest may change over time …*

Thacker notes:

the 17th and 18th centuries were dominated by the theological analogy of the transcendence of God in relation to the world, which correlates to the political idea of the transcendence of the sovereign ruler

from one authority to another, and from one age to another, how can we avoid becoming ourselves part of that never-ending state of transition which is the process of decomposition?

How long until "not yet" turns into "never-ending"? How long can a "delay" be? And consequently, **how long until a provisional idea of culture as decomposition develops into another idea about culture— about civilization itself?**

§ 6

To my knowledge no one has underlined Fredy Perlman's transformative use of decomposition in *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*. He introduces the term in a passage that could be used to explain one of the ways in which the situationist critique of culture was transformed in the direction of the current array of primitivist, green anarchist, and anti-civilization perspectives.

The death of Egypt's gods is recorded. After two or three generations of Pharaoh's protection, the figures on the Temple walls and pillars no longer jump or fly; they no longer even breathe. They're dead. They're lifeless copies of the earlier, still living figures. The copyists are exact, we would say pedantic; they seem to think that faithful copying of the originals will bring life to the copies.

A similar death and decomposition must pale the songs and ceremonies as well. What was once joyful celebration, selfabandon, orgiastic communion with the beyond, shrinks to lifeless ritual, official ceremony led by the head of State and his officials.

> *It all becomes theater, and it is all staged. It is no longer for sharing but for show. And it no longer enlarges the participant, who now becomes a mere spectator. He feels diminished, intimidated, awed by the power of Pharaoh's household.*
>
> *Our painting, music, dance, everything we call Art, will be heirs of the moribund spiritual. What we call Religion will be another dead heir, but at such a high stage of decomposition that its onceliving source can no longer be divined.*

The situationist inheritance is clear.[4] Ritual and repetition replace life and creative action. Except this is not the decline of art, but *art itself as decline*. Decomposition is presented here not as the culture of an advanced technological society whose history has stalled on the way to communist revolution; not the culture of the "not yet", but culture *as such*. This is one sense, and one source, of what is called Civilization in the perspective of anti-civilization thought. An attitude that Debord outlined with respect to capitalist or spectacular culture was now shaken loose from its grounding in our epoch, and granted the broadest historical sweep possible. *Has all history been decomposition?*—But if the answer to this question is affirmative, then the very notions of epoch and historical sweep (let alone spectacular and capitalist culture) have to be re-evaluated from the perspective that has redefined decomposition. **The priority of organization and breakdown are reversed, and the breakdown is now primary—primordial.**

[4] The other possible source for some of Perlman's uses of this term would be Jacques Camatte. But his use of it is closer to the SI than to Camatte. They probably have a common source in Marxist theory of the early twentieth century.

> *Medieval and early modern Christianity is primarily* theological*—the long tradition of apocalyptic literature, as well as the Scholastic commentaries on the nature of evil, cast the non-human world within a moral framework of salvation. In modernity, in the intersection of scientific hegemony, industrial capitalism, and what Nietzsche famously prophesied as the death of God, the non-human world gains a different value. In modernity, the response is primarily* existential*—a questioning of the role of human individuals and human groups in light of modern science, high technology, industrial and post-industrial capitalism, and world wars.*

In the light of the ongoing and growing disaster called irreversible climate change, *Desert* clearly exposes the theological-existential roots (the modern roots, that is to say) of anarchist politics, not particularly different, as far as this issue goes, from the panorama of Left or radical positions. What matters to me is the opportunity to strike out beyond these positions, elaborating an anti-politics thought through in reference to a point of view Thacker calls *cosmological. Could such a cosmological view*, he writes, *be understood not simply as the view from interstellar space, but as the view of the world-without-us, the Planetary view? Desert* might be one of the first signs of the paradoxical draw of this view, which, it should be clear by now, is something other than a position to be adopted. But for those who like the convenience names lend to things, consider the version Thacker elaborates (in a discussion of the meaning of *black* in *black metal*, of all things). He calls it cosmic pessimism:

> *The view of Cosmic Pessimism is a strange mysticism of the world-without-us, a hermeticism of the abyss, a noumenal occultism. It is the difficult thought of the world as absolutely unhuman, and indifferent to*

is not reducible to either, however optimistic our philosophy, theory, or science may be. In terms perhaps more familiar to some green anarchists, the World corresponds to the material and mental processes of civilization, and the Earth to Nature as constructed by civilization. Civilization, so it would seem, produces nature as its knowable byproduct as it encloses the wild, leaving fields, parks, and gardens, along with domesticated and corralled wild animals, including, of course, our species. Does the wildness or wilderness of the green anarchists then correspond to the Planet, as world-without-us? Only if we can grasp that the wild, like, or *as*, chaos, is ultimately unknowable—not because of some defect in our faculties but because it includes their limits and undoing. When green anarchists and others invoke the wild, we must always be sure to ask if they mean an especially unruly bit of nature, nature that is not yet fully processed by the civilized, or something that civilization will never domesticate or conquer. Planet is an odd category, in that it seems to correspond both to the putative and impossible object of science (a science without an observer) and an inexplicable and strange image emergent from out of the recesses of the unconscious (which itself raises a troubling question as to what an unconscious is at all if it can be said to issue images that exclude us). I think about this third category in terms of *Desert* as I read this passage from Thacker:

> *When the world as such cataclysmically manifests itself in the form of a disaster, how do we interpret or give meaning to the world? There are precedents in Western culture for this kind of thinking. In classical Greece the interpretation is primarily* mythological—*Greek tragedy, for instance, not only deals with the questions of fate and destiny, but in so doing it also evokes a world at once familiar and unfamiliar, a world within our control or a world as a plaything of the gods. By contrast, the response of*

To detail this anti-historical grasp of history, I will need to isolate a conceptual core in *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*[5] Three axioms:

1. History (not as cosmic time, but as His-Story) begins accidentally, as the runaway cascade of problems and complications beginning with a situation of ecological imbalance; this event is also the constitution of the first Leviathan.

   Corollary:
   The Leviathan places human beings in a situation they do not meet anywhere else in the Biosphere except in rare places like Sumer.

That is, Sumer is the place of an accident; and the Leviathan is the generalization and reproduction of that accident. To say it is an accident is to say that the accident was a contingent event, an event that did not have to happen.

2. Every Leviathan is in a state of decomposition (its artificial life in some sense *is* decomposition). Perlman hints at this throughout the book until putting it plainly towards the end, referencing
   the decomposition that accompanies every functioning Leviathan.

   Corollary:
   The scribes (historians, intellectuals by extension) are trained not to see the decomposition as such.

[5] I think for too long this essay has been relegated to the realm of appreciative private readings on one hand, and public dismissals (on grounds of romanticism) on the other. I found another way to read it, so I am propagating it.

3. Once the decomposition of a given Leviathan is complete, its decomposed fragments can reorganize into a new Leviathan.

> *We've seen that earlier Leviathans were always in a state of decomposition. When one decomposed, others swallowed its remains.*

Or should this be:

3. Once the decomposition of a given Leviathan is complete, its decomposed fragments *will* reorganize into a new Leviathan.

It is difficult to say. It is clear enough that the beginning of the process is accidental. But is its unfolding accidental? Is the movement of complication from one Leviathan to another, the increasing globalization of decomposition, a process that Perlman thought of as necessary?

§ 7

I am not sure how to answer these questions, nor do I think Fredy knew how. He begins the penultimate chapter writing about his impatience to finish the story, the book… to finish *His-Story*. It is not much further on that the last passage I cited continues:

> *… when there are no others, when Leviathan is One, the tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing, is almost at an end.*
>
> *Civilization, synonym of Capital, Technology and The Modern World, called Leviathan by Hobbes and Western Spirit by Turner, is as racked by decomposition as any earlier Leviathan. But Civilization is not*

knowable? And if not, why the preceding taking of sides? The chaos that *Desert* summons is not ontological. No new theory of being is claimed here. The effect is first of all psychological: stating what more or less everyone knows, but will not admit. If *Desert* deserves the label nihilist, it is really in this sense, that it knowingly points to the unknowable, to the background of all three narcissistic wounds. (This is my way of admitting that talking or writing about nihilism does not clarify much of anything. If it was worth doing, it is not because I wanted to share a way of believing-in-nothing. I see now that I was going somewhere else. *The analysis of nihilism is the object of psychology… it being understood that this psychology is also that of the cosmos,* wrote Deleuze.)

* * * *

In the Dust of This Planet introduces a tripartite distinction between World, Earth, and Planet. Thacker states that the human world, our sociocultural horizon of understanding, is what is usually meant by world. This is the world as it is invoked in politics, in statements that begin: *what the world needs…,* and of course any and all appeals to *save* or *change the world.* It is the single world of globalism (and of global revolution) but also the many little worlds of multiculturalism, nationalism, and regionalism. But one could argue that our experience (and the gaps in our experience) also unfold in another world, the enveloping site of natural processes, from climate to chemical and physical processes, of course including our own biology. This is the Earth that we are often invited to save in ecological politics or activism. A third version of what is meant by world is what Thacker calls the Planet. If the world as human World is the world-for-us, and the Earth as natural world is a world-for-itself, the Planet is the world-without-us. Visions of the World and the Earth correspond roughly to subjective and objective perspectives; but what these are visions *of*, the Planet,

archists because it is a materially forced anarchy. This does not mean that we are inherently aggressive or whatever you want to associate with social chaos, but rather ungovernable in the long run (or at least governed by forces and aims other than the ones accounted for in political reasoning). It does mean, however, that the idea *we are ungovernable in the long run*, the affirmation of which is more or less synonymous with the confidence with which the anarchists take their position, is now closely linked with another idea, that *in the last instance the Earth is not our natural home*. It may have been our home for some time, for a time that we call prehistory. Indeed, Fredy Perlman marks the transition from prehistory to His-Story, or Civilization, as the prolongation of an event of ecological imbalance, a prolongation whose overall effect is destructive, even as the short-term or narrowly focused results along the way are to make the Earth more and more of a welcoming and natural place for humans to be. And now our parting of ways with Hakim Bey may be clarified, for, even if he did not simply take the side of chaos, he did write:

> *remember, only in Classical Physics does Chaos have anything to do with entropy, heat-death, or decay. In our physics (Chaos Theory), Chaos identifies with tao, beyond both yin-as-entropy & yang-as-energy, more a principle of continual creation than of any* nihil*, void in the sense of* potentia*, not exhaustion. (Chaos as the "sum of all orders.")*

He was making an argument about what is stupid about death-glorifying art which, parenthetically, still seems relevant. But I simply don't see why chaos (or tao, for that matter) is somehow better understood as creation than as destruction, or why it is preferable to invoke *potentia* and not exhaustion. In the name of what? "Ontological" anarchism? Life? And the sum of all orders… is this a figure of something at all

> *one Leviathan among many. It is The One. Its final decomposition is Leviathan's end. After twenty centuries of stony sleep vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, the sleeper is about to wake to the cadences of a long-forgotten music or to the eternal silence of death without a morrow.*

This passage is deeply ambiguous. Is the image offered here of "final decomposition" another version of the "delay"? Or is the word final to be taken literally, meaning that decomposition—and so history—are coming to an end? And is this end itself the result of a certain accumulation of complications, a tension to be understood naturalistically and ecologically, as the resonance of the primordial accident? Are those who are aware of this decomposition even a little set apart from it through this knowledge? Can they move in a way that does not belong to its process?

> *it is not yet known … if the new outsiders do indeed still have an "inner light," namely an ability to reconstitute lost rhythms, to recover music, to regenerate human cultures.*
>
> *It is also not known if the technological detritus that crowds and poisons the world leaves human beings any room to dance. What is known is that Leviathan, the great artifice, single and world-embracing for the first time in His-story, is decomposing.*

What is clear is that Perlman broadened the relevance of decomposition by definitively breaking with the progressive and optimistic aspects that it bore in its first situationist version. By making the process of breakdown primary, he invented a new kind of diagnosis of the present, and a new way to understand history. This diagnosis suggests:

1. That history, as a whole or in segments, has not been progressive, in either a linear or cyclical way, but rather a process of increasing complication, destructiveness, fallingapart of previous epochs (along with their attitudes, ideas, practices, and so on).

   Corollary:
   The very phenomenon of history (as His-Story), its possible unity as narrative and idea, is peculiarly undergirded by this process, which is itself a fragile hanging together of fragments of fragments, endlessly shattering, strangely recombining, giving most observers the sense of "delay."

2. That what we might be inspired by in history has to do with turning decomposition against itself in the negative manner of *détournement*. Or, as some friends recently put it,

   we locate ourselves within the subversive current of history that willfully attempts to break with the ongoing progress of society.

To identify this negative movement, or this subversive current, is to lose, to give up on, the sense of "delay" and to become aware of decomposition.

§ 8

Awareness of decomposition is then, most immediately, a new kind of diagnosis of the present and an alternative to historical thought. This diagnosis belongs to the subversive current; it does not take place in isolation. We are and are not Society. We know we are in—we do not know if we may be out of—decomposition. In this awareness we discern that decomposition is not Decline, as though the film of

psychic wound can be open and humanity, whoever that is, may limp on, wounded, thinking whatever it prefers to think about itself. What *Desert* draws attention to is a congeries of events that could increasingly trouble our collective ability to go on with this story of a natural place for (some) humans. Irreversible climate change is both something that can be understood (in scientific and derivative, common-sense ways) and something that, properly considered, suggests a vast panorama of unknowns. It is true that *Desert* makes much of its case by citing scientists and scientific statistics. But the real question here is about the status of these invocations of science. This is where a subtler reading shows its superiority. If the entire argumentative thrust of *Desert* relied on science, the pamphlet would be fairly disposable. *Desert* invokes science to put before the hopeful and the apathetic images of a terrible and sublime sort. We could say that its explicit argument is based on science, plus a certain kind of anti-political reasoning. But its overall effect is to dislodge us from our background assumption of a knowable and predictable world into a less predictable, less knowable awareness. After all, it would be just as easy to develop a similar narrative in the discourse of a pessimistic political science, emphasizing massive population growth and social chaos: an irruptive and ungovernable human biology beyond sociality. Let's try it. From a red anarchist perspective, this could mean more opportunities for mutual aid, for setting the example of anarchy as order; chaos would be a kind of forced clean slate, a time to show that we are better and more efficient than the forces of the state. From an insurrectionary perspective, the chaos would be an inhuman element making possible the generalization of conflict. General social chaos would be the macrocosm corresponding to the microcosm of the riot. For them chaos would also be an opportunity, in this case to hasten and amplify anomic irruptions. In sum, one could make the same argument about the biological mass of humanity as about the Earth—that its coming chaos is an opportunity for an-

be true, does the "no hope"/"no future" perspective (the supposed nihilism) which *Desert* to some extent adopts, and others to some extent impute to it, help or hinder an overall anarchist position? A less obvious discussion revolves around two very different sorts of questions: *what myths does exposing this reality shatter?* and, if we are brave enough to think ourselves into this demythologized space that has eclipsed the mythical future, *is an anarchist position still a coherent or relevant response to survival there*? The myth that is shattered here is first and foremost that wonderful old story about the Earth:

> *Earth, our bright home…*
>
> Shelley

There are two main versions of this story. In the religious version, a god intends for us to live here and creates the Earth for us, or, to a lesser extent, creates us for the Earth. In either case our apparent fit into the Earth, our presumed kinship with it, usually expressed in the thought of Nature or the natural, has a transcendent guarantee. In the second version, which is usually of a rational or scientific sort, we have evolved to live on the Earth and can expect it to be responsive to our needs. Here the guarantee is immanent and rational. It is true that this second story, in the version of evolutionary theory, also taught us that we could have easily not come to be here, and that we may not always be here. That is why Freud classed Darwin's theory as the second of three wounds to human narcissism (the first being the Copernican theory, which displaced the Earth from the center of the cosmos, and the third being Freud's own theory, which displaced conscious thought from prominence in mental life). But a certain common sense, or what could be called the most obtuse rationalism, seems to have reintroduced the religious content of the first version into the second, and concluded that it is good or right or proper for us to be here. Natural, in short. In any case, the lesson here is that the

Progress were run backwards. Decline as a general logic would mean that everything gets worse. But the idea here is to undermine any global, world-historical scale for judging what is better or worse. Only from within decomposition has Progress seemed possible; and only from within decomposition would history appear to be complete disaster, or completely anything (the victory of one race, culture, or religion, for example, as vindicated by history, or the defeat of another). Such an awareness could come as a shock. It could lead to the denial of temporal logic (order, progress, explanation, justification). But it is not a relativism that flattens out the differences between events.[6] It may amount to a perspective from outside civilization.

§ 9

One could reply that in my presentation of this awareness, in the overall thrust of this essay, I have exemplified the anarchist allergy to history that Debord diagnosed in *Society of the Spectacle*,

> *It is the* ideology of pure freedom, *an ideology that puts everything on the same level* [qui égalise tout] *and loses any conception of the "historical evil" (the negation at work within history). This fusion of all partial demands into a single all-encompassing demand has given anarchism the merit of representing the rejection of existing conditions in the name of the whole of life rather than from the standpoint of some particular critical specialization; but the fact that this fusion has been envisaged only in the absolute, in accordance with individual whim and in advance of any practical actualization, has doomed anarchism to an all too obvious incoherence.*

[6] That it could lead to the denial of temporal logic does not mean that it is the denial of what I called above "cosmic time."

I would answer: as to losing any conception of the negation at work in history, yes, excessively, I hope. Evil is not a term I find useful. But the **negative or destructive side of history is for some of us more or less all that history has been or done. In the strict sense, nothing is being worked on or built up in or through history.** The places, people, and events in past time that we enjoy or claim, appreciate or appropriate, must be creatively reidentified as non-historical, extra-historical, or anti-historical currents. There may have been, may continue to be what Foucault called insurrections of subjugated knowledges: counter-histories. It is true that certain moments of revolt are coupled with strange perspectives on history. But it is also true that these counter-histories have an odd way of becoming ordinary histories, either by incorporation into universal His-Story, its narrative, or by becoming the local his-stories of smaller groups and communities. As the latter they may have a temporary or even long-lasting protective effect for those groups or communities, but they weigh in the same way as His-story on those who purposely or accidentally put in their lot with them. Foucault's attempts to write what he called histories of the present could be described as last-ditch attempts to see what could be done with history; but even he, in his wise ambivalence, wrote history as genealogy. The genealogical perspective sometimes locates or even summons counter-histories, but usually only the lives of the infamous:

> *Lives of a few lines or a few pages, nameless misfortunes and adventures gathered into a handful of words. Brief lives, encountered by chance in books and documents. Exempla… not so much lessons to ponder as brief effects whose force fades almost at once.*

It is the awareness of that fading, another name, perhaps, for decomposition, that we can no longer do without.

yses, it identifies social chaos with a badly managed society and opposes to it a harmonious anarchic order (which, it was later specified, could exist in harmony with a nature itself conceived as harmonious). This conception of chaos, which is still quite prevalent today, does not even merit its name. It is a way of morally condemning capitalism, the State, society, or what you will; it is basically name-calling. Any worthwhile conception of chaos should begin from a non-moral position, admitting that the formlessness of chaos is not for us to judge. That much Hakim Bey *did* amit. What, in retrospect especially, is curious about his little missive "Chaos" are the various references to "agents of chaos," "avatars of chaos", even a "prophethood of chaos." It is a lovely letter from its time and perhaps some other times as well; I have no intention to criticize it. It is a marked improvement on any version of *anarchy is order*, and yet… and yet. It comes too close, or reading it some came too close, to simply opting for chaos, as though order and chaos were sides and it were a matter of choosing sides. The inversion of a moral statement is still a moral statement, after all. What is left to say about chaos, then? The explicit references to chaos in *Desert* are all references to social disorder. But a thoughtful reader might, upon reading through for the third or fourth time, start to sense that another, more ancient sense of chaos is being invoked: less of an extreme of disorder and more of a primordial nothingness, a "yawning gap", as the preferred gloss of some philologists has it. The repeated reference to a probable global archipelago of "large islands of chaos" is directly connected to the destabilization of the global climate. And this is the terrible thought that *Desert* constructs for us and will not save us from: that from now on we survive in a world where the global climate is irreversibly destabilized, and that such a survival is something other than life or politics as we have so far dreamt them. The meager discussion we've seen so far on *Desert* revolves around questions such as: is this true? and, since most who bother thinking it through will take it to

read *Desert* will be familiar with the story it tells. Irreversible global climate change, meshing in an increasingly confusing way with a global geopolitical system that intensifies control in resource-rich areas while loosening or perhaps losing its grips in the hinterlands, the growing desert… It is the story, then, of literal deserts, and also of zones deserted by authority or that those who desert the terrain of authority inhabit. But let's be clear about this: *Desert* does not name its own position. It is less a book that proposes a certain strategy or set of practices and more a book about material conditions that are likely to affect any strategy, any practices whatsoever. What is best about *Desert* is not just the unflinching sobriety with which its author piles up evidence and insights for such a near future, without drifting too far into speculation; it is the way they do not abandon the idea of surviving in such a decomposing world. It is neither optimism nor pessimism in the usual sense; it is another way to grasp anarchy. That is why I write that much remains to be said about it. One way to begin thinking through *Desert* is to concentrate less on what position it supposedly takes (is there a green nihilism? for or against hope?) and to consider how to push its perspective farther. This means both asking more questions about how it allows us to redefine survival and taking up the possibilities for thought that it mostly hints at. For example, to say the future is unknowable is a pleasant banality, which can just as well be invoked by optimists as pessimists; but to concentrate on what is unknowable in a way that projects it into past and present as well is to think beyond the dull conversation about hope, or utopia and dystopia, for that matter. Here is one example of how such thinking might unfold: *Desert* seems to offer a novel perspective on *chaos*. There have probably been two anarchist takes on chaos so far: the traditional one, summed up in the motto, *anarchy is not chaos, but order*; and Hakim Bey's discussions of chaos, which may be summed up in his poetic phrase *Chaos never died.* The former is clear enough: like many leftist anal-

§ 10

As to incoherence, this remark was aimed at the anarchists Debord knew, not the ones we know. But one might say that the "incoherence" of "aiming at the absolute" is precisely what our discourse will sound like to someone who still and always relies on historical explanations. What we are doing with history is what Debord himself recommended we do with decomposition: to turn it against itself parodically, in *détournement*. And here the third rule of *détournement* applies:

> Détournement *is less effective the more it approaches a rational reply.*

I took the phrase "awareness of decomposition" from Vaneigem. I have already cited part of the passage:

> *People of* ressentiment *are the perfect survivors—people bereft of the consciousness of possible transcendence, people of the age of decomposition. By becoming aware of spectacular decomposition, a person of* ressentiment *becomes a nihilist. Active nihilism is prerevolutionary.*

The age of decomposition: a global diagnosis. It is populated by two types: people of *ressentiment*, survivors, are those who continue to believe in progress and contribute to processes of decomposition. Artists or not, their production is repetition. These are the passive nihilists of the wedge position. The person who is aware of this, aware of decomposition, thereby becomes an active nihilist. For Vaneigem this is prerevolutionary; it is not for the likes of Novatore, or many of our friends these days. But what studying *Against His-Story* perhaps shows is that the *pre-* in *prerevolutionary* has something of historical progress about it. As though there really were three stages and the middle one was conscience, consciousness, awareness! **To**

take up nihilism as a problem today means precisely this: that nothing in particular seems to us prerevolutionary because revolution sounds too much like decomposition to our ears. Thus my penchant for the wedge position, insofar as it affirms active nihilism without positing something else after it; thus my insistence on some version of the diagnosis—the awareness of decomposition that is part of our thinking, not the contemplation of a historically achieved reality to be understood historically and overcome by making history!

§ 11

I would suggest that all of the interminable discussions of cycles of struggle, the various and competing periodizations of capitalism and technology (for starters), especially as they have desperately sought to appraise and orient us in terms of the history of the twentieth century, have been deceptive. They have traced outlines of decomposition without discovering their complicity in its logic. Yes, decomposition tempts everyone to periodize. To each her own perverse history. Think of our pastimes—think of gossip! Think of the idle talk of generations or decades in discussions of the character of individuals, their politics, or their modes of consumption of culture. What we bring forward in such sleepy analyses of culture and character are our own repetitions, our own novelties, our own crappy contributions. It is the work of culture, after all. Some of us feel a need to remain silent, sovereignly neutral, in the face of this folk art of milieus and subcultures.

It could be good practice, at least, for it is just this neutral gaze with which we have learned to read certain of our contemporaries.

> *Empire is not the crowning achievement of a civilization, the end-point of its ascendent arc. Rather it is*

the voluntary from the involuntary), all our positions, those little compressed bundles of opinion and analysis, practice and experience, crumble—*as positions*. No doubt many will find this disconcerting. But something of what we tried to do by thinking up, debating, adopting and abandoning, positions, is left—something lives on, survives—maybe just the primal thrust that begins with a question or profound need and collapses in a profession of faith or identity. That would be the path back to the perspective of *Desert* (now irreparably transformed). What is left, the afterlife of our first outward movements, might be something for each to witness alone, in a solitude far from the gregarious comfort of recognizable positions, of politics. To say nothing of community.

* * * *

All our maneuvering, all our petty excuses for not studying it aside, there is still much to be said about this wonderful, challenging booklet, *Desert*. To wit, that it is the first written elaboration of sentiments some of us admit to and others feel without confessing to them. And, moreover, that it hints repeatedly at an even broader and more troubling set of perspectives about the limits to what we can do, and maybe of what we are altogether. If the milieu's demand were accepted and these feelings and ideas were narrowed down to a position, it could indeed be called *green nihilism*. In this naming of a position the second word indicates one familiar political, or rather anti-political, sense of *nihilism*—the position that views action, or inaction, from the perspective that nothing can be done to save the world. That no single event, or series of events clumsily apprehended as a single Event, can be posited as the object of political or moral optimism, except by the faithful and the deluded. Moreover, that the injunction to think of the future, to *hope* in a certain naive way, is itself pernicious, and often a tool of our enemies. As to *green*—well, those who have

> *The world is increasingly unthinkable—a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction. In spite of our daily concerns, wants, and desires, it is increasingly difficult to comprehend the world in which we live and of which we are a part. To confront this idea is to confront an absolute limit to our ability to adequately understand the world at all.*

The first passage is from *Desert*, an anonymous pamphlet on the meaning of the irreversibility of climate change for anarchist practice. The second is from Eugene Thacker's *In the Dust of this Planet*, a collection of essays that leads from philosophy to horror, or rather leads philosophy to horror. I bring them together here because they seem to me to coincide in a relatively unthought theoretical zone. As *Desert* invokes the present and coming anarchy and chaos, it admits the *weirdness* of the future (for our inherited thought patterns and political maps, at least); when *Dust of this Planet* gestures to the weirdness and unthinkability of the world, it invokes the current and coming biological, geological, and climatological chaos of the planet. They should be read together; the thought that is possible in that stereoscopic reading is what my *or* intends. (I mean to gesture towards the passage from one perspective to the other, and perhaps back.) If *Desert* sets out from the knowability of the world—as the object of science, principally—it has the rare merit of spelling out its increasing unknowability as an object for our political projects, our predictions and plans. *Dust of this Planet* allows us to push this thought father in an eminently troubling direction, revealing a wilderness more wild than the wild nature invoked by the critics of capitalism and civilization: the unthinkable Planet behind the inhabitable Earth. As we slip in this direction (which is also past the point of distinguishing

> *the tail-end of an inward turning process of disaggregation, as that which must check and if possible arrest the process.*

wrote Tiqqun. This perspective seems close to the one I have been elaborating here. But they immediately follow that proposition with:

> *At first glance, Empire seems to be a parodic recollection of the entire, frozen history of a "civilization." And this impression has a certain intuitive correctness. Empire is in fact civilization's last stop before it reaches the end of its line, the final agony in which it sees its life pass before its eyes.*

It is just this familiar reference to the final and highest stage towards which we have become skeptical. We are as eager to find a way out of the process, supersession or overcoming, as we suppose many of our friends to be. And yet a few of us have had to abandon this temporal logic, the apparent necessity of the highest stage. For us it has come to seem a rhetorical crossing of the wires, where description spills over into prescription. Psychologically, it makes sense: to insist that this is the highest stage and the final moment means that if you have any inclination to act against Empire et. al., you must do it now! *Hic rhodus*, etc.—

> *This is the place to jump, the place to dance!*

that is how Fredy began, too.[7] But, as I have noted, he did not end there, but in ambiguity, in questions. Our thought decomposes, too…

[7] *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!* goes back to Marx and Hegel, of course. In the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx writes of a situation "in which retreat is impossible."

§ 12

In sum, the perspective that says that decomposition is the logic of His-Story elucidates two things. First, that we were right to deny Progress; second, that we are not believers in its opposite, an inverted Regression away from a golden age. As I imagine it, a principal characteristic of whatever preceded His-Story (civilization, etc.) would be its neutrality, its stony silence at the level of metanarrative. **Rather than Progress or Regression we could describe historical decomposition as the accelerating complication of events. This acceleration is violent and dangerous.** Here and there an eddy may form in which things either slow down or temporarily stabilize in the form of an improvement. What we can say with some certainty is that as historical time elapses, things get more complicated; and that these complications so outrun their antecedents that the attempt to explain retroactively becomes ever more confusing.

Situationally, we may be getting some purchase for the moment, an angle, a perspective. But what Debord perhaps could not admit, what Perlman perhaps understood, is that decomposition had always been there in our explanation, our diagnosis, and the actions they are said to justify; and that His-Story is decomposition's double movement: as Civilization unravels, it narrates its unraveling. The dead thing, Leviathan, organizes life, builds itself up as armor in and around it (which would include machines and a certain stiffening of postures and gestures, and concurrently thinking and action, in human bodies). But the dead thing remains dead, and it breaks down. It functions by breaking down. It creates ever more complex organizations (analyses of behavior) that then decompose, i.e. break down.

production, and, indirectly, of the milieu itself. Its reception is a kind of diagnostic test, a demonstration of our special obtuseness. If I am right about even some of the preceding, then the increasingly speculative nature of what follows ought to prove interesting to a few, and repulsive to the rest.

* * * *

I intend the *or* in the title to be destabilizing. It does not indicate a choice to be made between two already somewhat fictitious positions. (Quotation marks for each would not have been strong enough. To say this or that position is fictitious may seem to be belied by the advance, here or there, of those who present themselves as the representatives of positions. This is where we need to make our case most forcefully, arguing back that to take on a position *as an identity* simply eludes the *what* of position altogether, making it rest on a different, more familiar kind of fiction.) By placing the *or* between them I mean to mark a slippage, which I consider to be a movement of involuntary thought. Not being properly yoked to action, to what is considered voluntary, it is the kind of thought most have little time for. It has to do with passing imperceptibly from one state to another, and what may be learned in that shift. It is a terrible kind of thought at first, and, for some, will perhaps always be so, all the more so inasmuch as we are not its brave protagonists… Compare these passages:

> *The tide of Western authority will recede from much, though by no means all, of the planet. A writhing mess of social flotsam and jetsam will be left in its wake. Some will be patches of lived anarchy, some of horrible conflicts, some empires, some freedoms, and, of course, unimaginable weirdness.*

And:

thing to the tune of: "Oh, *Desert*? I hated it! It was so *depressing*!" And that is it. No discussion, no engagement, just stating in a fairly direct manner that, if the writing did not further the agenda of hope or reinforce the belief that mass movements can improve the global climate situation, then it is not relevant to a discussion of green issues (which are therefore redefined as setting out from that agenda and belief). In the background of both exchanges is a kind of obtuseness characteristic of the anarchist milieu: our propensity to be as ready to pick up the new thing as to dismiss it either immediately after consumption or soon after another consumes it. This customary speed, which we share with many with whom we share little else, is what necessitates the yes-or-no operation. Whatever the response is, it has to happen quickly. (We are the best of Young-Girls when it comes to the commodities we ourselves produce.) To do something else than mechanically phagocyte *Desert* (or anything else worth reading) and absorb it or excrete it back out onto the bookshelf/literature table/shitpile, some of us will need to take up a far less practical, far less pragmatic attitude towards the best of what circulates in our little space of reading. In short, it is to intervene in the smooth functioning of the anarchist-identity machine, our own homegrown apparatus, which reproduces the milieu, ingesting unmarked ideas, expelling anarchist ideas. Of course all those online rants, our many little zines, our few books—the ones we write and make, and the ones that we adopt now and then—are only part of this set-up, which also includes living arrangements, political practices, anti-political projects, and so on. All together, from a few crowded metropoles to the archipelago of outward- or inward-looking towns, that array could be called the machine that makes anarchist identity, one of those awful hybrids of anachronism and ultramodernity that clutter our times. But, trivial though the role of *Desert* may be in the reproduction of the milieu, its small role in that reproduction is especially remarkable given that it directly addresses the limits of that re-

§ 13

Returning to the analysis of nihilist positions with which I began, I would say that the wedge position and the diagnostic one, the active nihilist and contemplative critical-theoretical appraisal, are both the results of running the Nietzschean diagnostic through a political machine, turning its psychology into political psychology. And **the political machine is one of the devices of decomposition.** To appraise all of society critically, or to divide the friend and the enemy once and for all, are the respectively theoretical and pratical Ur-operations of politics. All debate about the priority of the one over the other aside, I recognize in them the basic moves of the constitution of a *polis*.

> *The councils represent order in the face of the decomposition of the state…*

wrote Vaneigem in his "Note to the Civilized." It is possible to read this, not as the political opposition of order and chaos, organization and disorder, but as an understandable misprision of the tension that, whoever wins, pushes decomposition farther by temporarily concealing it. And in this temporary concealing, followed by its inevitable unconcealing, it pushes nihilism farther in its diffuse, passive, social direction. Unitary urbanism…

> *May 1968 revealed to a great many people that ideological confusion tries to conceal the real struggle between the "party" of decomposition and the "party" of global* dépassement

wrote Vaneigem in 1971. Quotes or not, what he is invoking are parties, sides. The entire text "Terrorism or Revolution" is based on the wedge, drawing lines and making the same kind of claim we have by now become used to: "this is the highest

stage," or its variant, "if not now, never." These claims issue from a confusion deeper than ideological confusion, the confusion that *is* decomposition.

§ 14

Those who echo an ancient military rhetoric, invoking necessity in the political and historical senses, drawing lines and insisting "now or never" as if by habit, will always confuse the problem of nihilism. The few of us who feel it as a *problem*, and only secondarily, if at all, as a position, understand that we cannot divide ourselves from decomposition to diagnose it and to act on it. Our psychology is anti-political, so we have to explore in other ways. Our awareness of decomposition leads to certain insights that are disconcerting and fascinating as well; they may well be visions from outside Civilization. This awareness informs our action without distinguishing us from events. I am referring to what is most question-worthy: the passing sense of the weird and meaningless way in which things happen, beyond causality and so beyond lasting explanation. I am referring to what might be called events as signs of non-events, or historical events as masks of non-historical events. **So if and when *we* call ourselves nihilists, know that we are wearing a mask**. It might be what we need to face others in decomposition. Facing them we might also come to understand Baltasar Gracián's saying,

> *It takes more today to make one sage than seven in years gone by, and more to deal with a single person than an entire nation in the past.*

Green Nihilism or Cosmic Pessimism

> *Men have been so mad as to believe that God is pleased by harmony*
> Spinoza

Some of us have read *Desert*, and opted to reprint it, to promote its discussion, maybe to promulgate (at least repeat) some of what is said in it. Despite our efforts, I still feel it has not had the uptake it deserves. I am beginning to think that the issue is less about our limited ability to distribute texts and discuss ideas, and more about the limits of the milieu itself. As to the reception *Desert did* get, the most one can say is that a few literate anarchists quickly *processed* it, either absorbing it into their position or rejecting it. This scanning-followed-by-yes-or-no operation pretty much sums up what many anarchists consider reading to be. One sort of rejection was documented in the egoist newspapers *The Sovereign Self* and *My Own* (and responded to in *The Anvil*): it concerned the idea that the anonymous author of *Desert* was engaging in a pessimistic rhetoric for dramatic effect while concealing their ultimate clinging to hope, perhaps like those who endlessly criticize love, only to be revealed as the most perfectionist of romantics in the last instance. *That* exchange on *Desert* tells much more about the readers—what they expected, what they are looking for—than the booklet itself. As does the other, sloppier, sort of rejection of the writing, which has for obvious reasons not appeared in print. More than one person has been overheard to say some-