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Marina St. James and Fíona Vivienne
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Luigi Mangione and the Revolt Against Reverence

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I begin with appetite. Not the appetite that can be satisfied by acquisition, nor the domesticated desire that waits patiently for permission, but the appetite of the living individual who discovers that existence belongs to no abstraction. The appetite to think beyond inheritance, to desire without justification, to create without consecrating creation as duty. To encounter the world as something inexhaustible, terrible, sensuous, and gloriously unfinished.

I want the pleasures of my own existence. The books scattered across a table. The intoxicating intimacy of an idea pursued beyond its respectable conclusion. The warmth of another body. The insolence of laughter when solemnity has become unbearable. The freedom to squander an afternoon upon something useless and beautiful, to love without making love an obligation, to refuse without transforming refusal into a universal commandment. There is no sacred cause concealed beneath these desires. They belong to the individual before she has been recruited into anything.

Stirner understood the quiet degradation of an existence surrendered to abstractions. Humanity, morality, society, the common good: how readily these exalted words become creditors, present-

ing their invoices to the individual and demanding payment in obedience. Even freedom may become an idol when it is transformed from something lived into something worshiped. The egoist does not escape possession merely by changing masters.

And Novatore, that irreconcilable enemy of resignation, carried this refusal into the dangerous territory of poetry. His creative nothing was no impoverished emptiness. It was the absence of a sacred foundation, the opening through which the individual might create without first obtaining permission from God, humanity, or history. I have no desire to exchange one altar for another.

There is something almost indecently beautiful in an existence that refuses to justify itself before the world. The individual is not a preliminary arrangement awaiting completion through society. She is not an instrument whose value must be demonstrated by usefulness. She is not raw material for the ambitions of institutions. She is already alive. And this is precisely why domination disgusts me.

Not because I have constructed an immaculate moral universe in which authority has been assigned the role of evil, but because authority presumes to subordinate this irreducible existence to purposes that are not her own. It arrives with its classifications, its permissions, its solemn explanations of necessity, and expects the living person to recognize herself in the categories imposed upon her. I recognize no such obligation. My hostility begins with something I love.

There is something vile in the bureaucratic management of human suffering. A person becomes ill. Pain enters the body with an intimacy no institution can share. The frightened hours belong to someone particular, with a history, a face, private affections, unfulfilled desires, and a thousand small attachments that make her existence unlike any other. Somewhere else, a calculation begins. Coverage. Authorization. Medical necessity. Contractual exclusion. Utilization management. The vocabulary grows progres-

The abyss offers no final judgment. It does not promise that the world will reward my desires or justify my refusals. It will not absolve me of contradiction, nor will it furnish an authority before which my existence can finally be declared legitimate. I require no such absolution. I intend to live. To create without permission. To enjoy without apology. To refuse the idols that demand my submission, including those erected in the name of rebellion. To keep my contempt for what I despise without allowing that contempt to become my master.

The world may retain its institutions, its solemnities, its elaborate ceremonies of obedience. It will not have my reverence. The abyss offers no victory, no permission, no applause. And still, I laugh.

Let the abyss gaze back, and let it tremble.

sively cleaner as the circumstances become more desperate. Then comes the word: *Denied.*

What an elegant little instrument of authority. Six letters that can be delivered without anger, without visible cruelty, without the inconvenience of looking into the face of the person who must endure the consequences. The decision may be accompanied by a courteous explanation. There may be an appeal. There may be another appeal. There may be a telephone number, an automated menu, a recorded assurance that the call is important. The individual is invited to participate in the administration of her own distress.

Here is a form of domination that rarely needs to announce itself as such. Its power lies partly in its impersonality. Responsibility passes through departments and procedures until the person who suffers can scarcely identify anyone to whom her suffering might be addressed. No one need hate her. No one need even know her. The arrangement can continue through the conscientious labor of people who consider themselves decent, performing tasks that appear reasonable when isolated from their cumulative consequences. This is what makes the machinery so repellent. Not that it is populated exclusively by monsters, but that monstrosity is unnecessary to its operation.

The suffering body becomes a claim. The claim becomes a cost. The cost becomes an exposure to be managed. Somewhere in this sequence, the individual whose existence gave rise to the entire proceeding disappears beneath the abstractions constructed to administer her. And the institution calls this efficiency. I find no grandeur in it. No intelligence worthy of admiration. Only the dreary ingenuity with which power learns to make its decisions appear inevitable.

The conversion of human vulnerability into financial calculation is not rendered innocent by the sophistication of the calculation. Nor does a decision become philosophically defensible merely because it conforms to a contract. Legality describes an arrange-

ment of enforceable permissions. It does not establish that the arrangement deserves my reverence.

Yet reverence is precisely what the individual is expected to offer. She must remain reasonable. She must understand the process. She must recognize the complexity of the institution's obligations. She must accept that the decision was made according to established criteria. Her own suffering, meanwhile, is treated as an unfortunate complication. What revolts me is not simply the possibility of a wrongful denial. It is the presumption that the individual's most intimate vulnerabilities may be subjected to an apparatus whose authority she is expected to accept as natural. I do not accept it.

Nor do I accept the moral theater through which the institution presents its operations as an expression of public responsibility. The language of care becomes particularly grotesque when spoken by an apparatus whose financial incentives may conflict with the provision of that care. The individual is asked to be grateful for the opportunity to petition. I would rather be impolite.

In December 2024, Brian Thompson, the chief executive of UnitedHealthcare, was shot and killed in Manhattan. Luigi Mangione was subsequently accused of the killing. The event produced an extraordinary public response, one that quickly escaped the respectable boundaries within which such events are ordinarily discussed. There was outrage, certainly. There was grief. But there was also mockery, fascination, contempt, and an unmistakable refusal among many people to participate in the expected ceremony of collective mourning. The response disturbed the guardians of respectable sentiment. They could condemn a killing; they could not compel a population to feel what it was told to feel. I understood that disturbance.

For years, people had encountered the health insurance apparatus as something at once intimate and unreachable. Its decisions could enter the most vulnerable moments of their lives, yet its authority remained protected by distance, complexity, and

out necessarily changing the conditions of its own existence. I have no interest in preserving an idol for its benefit.

What I refuse to surrender is the judgment that preceded the event and survived it. The health insurance apparatus remains repellent to me. Its bureaucratic conversion of suffering into financial calculation remains an intolerable presumption of authority over individual lives. The respectable language through which it explains itself does not soften my contempt. I do not owe it admiration. I do not owe it reverence. And I do not owe the guardians of public sentiment a performance of emotions I do not possess.

But neither does my existence belong to the institution I despise. I will not permit its machinery to colonize my imagination so completely that my life becomes an endless commentary upon its operations. There are more interesting things to do than hate. There are books to write, bodies to love, ideas to devour, beautiful useless things to make. There are afternoons that deserve to be squandered, conversations that deserve to continue until morning, intellectual heresies worth pursuing simply for the pleasure of discovering where they lead. There is the vertiginous possibility of becoming someone I have not yet imagined.

This is the freedom I desire. Not the sterile freedom of the isolated moral exemplar. Not the theatrical freedom of the idolized rebel. Not the freedom granted by an institution sufficiently generous to permit a few harmless eccentricities. The freedom of the individual who refuses to make her existence subordinate to a sacred cause, a political arrangement, a philosophical system, or the image of another person.

There is nothing gentle about such freedom. It is difficult, unstable, extravagant, and frequently inconvenient. It promises no admiration and offers no guarantee of vindication. It may produce tenderness as readily as contempt, creation as readily as destruction, laughter where solemnity has been commanded. I find that magnificent.

The question is terrible because it refuses the consolation of an existence purified of everything offensive. I cannot answer it by imagining that all domination will disappear, that every humiliation will be avenged, that every institution I despise will collapse beneath the weight of its contradictions. Such fantasies would make my affirmation dependent upon a future that has never been promised. Nor can I answer by elevating one extraordinary rupture above the rest of existence, as though a single event could redeem the innumerable ordinary hours through which life is actually lived.

The Dionysian is more demanding. It does not promise innocence. It does not guarantee justice. It offers no assurance that suffering will acquire meaning through some final reconciliation. It confronts existence in its terrifying abundance, where pleasure and destruction, creation and dissolution, cannot be neatly separated. I do not claim to have mastered this demand. Indeed, I distrust the ease with which philosophical language can transform a difficult encounter into another declaration of triumph.

But I know this: I do not wish to spend my existence waiting for the world to become worthy of my enjoyment. There are pleasures to be seized now, ideas to be pursued, affections to be cultivated, things to be created and destroyed within the changing arrangements of one's own life. The sovereign appetite does not require a hospitable universe. It requires a living individual. And that individual need not become morally pure, philosophically consistent in every passion, or permanently triumphant over her contradictions. She must remain capable of returning to herself.

The December event has already acquired its mythology. The images circulate. The arguments repeat. The accused remains subject to criminal proceedings. The corporation continues its operations. The machinery has survived the spectacle, as machinery so often does. There will be other spectacles. The crowd will discover other faces upon which to project its longings, other symbols through which to experience the sensation of rebellion with-

the immense prestige accorded to established institutions. Then, suddenly, the public language surrounding that authority fractured. The executive was not universally received as the dignified representative of a respectable enterprise. The corporation was not universally granted the benefit of solemn deference. The familiar demand that institutional power be treated with reverence simply because it was institutional power met resistance. The laughter was not polite. Why should it have been?

There is a curious expectation that the individual must preserve the emotional dignity of institutions that have shown little interest in preserving hers. She may describe her suffering, provided she does so appropriately. She may object, provided her objection remains civil. She may grieve, provided her grief does not disturb the decorum of those who administer the conditions under which she lives. Above all, she must never laugh at the wrong moment. She must never let contempt show through the costume of civility. The institution may enter her life without invitation, but her anger must knock politely at the door. I reject this expectation.

No institution possesses a natural right to command my sentiments. The death of a powerful individual does not oblige me to revise my judgment of the institution he represented. Nor must I disguise my revulsion toward that institution beneath ceremonial language merely because the occasion is solemn. Yet there is a distinction worth preserving. The death of an executive is not the death of the machinery. The contracts remain. The incentives remain. The administrative authority remains. The particular individual who occupied an office cannot be made to contain the entire structure within his person. To confuse the two would be to mistake symbolism for transformation.

And Mangione, too, became a symbol almost immediately. His image traveled through the world bearing desires that could never have belonged to him alone. Strangers assigned him motives, philosophies, and historical significance with remarkable confidence. The accused individual began disappearing beneath

the enormous imaginative burden placed upon him. A person was being transformed into an idea. The irony is considerable. A public response animated partly by hostility toward dehumanizing institutions had begun performing its own reduction of an individual into an abstraction. Stirner would have recognized the danger. The idol does not cease to be an idol because it wears the face of rebellion.

I need neither a martyr nor a saint. I have no desire to surrender my judgment to a stranger's image, however compelling the mythology surrounding him may become. But neither will I allow suspicion of idolatry to become an excuse for restoring the reverence that December so conspicuously disturbed. The public response exposed something real: the distance between institutional respectability and the lived judgment of those subjected to institutional power. That distance cannot be repaired by demanding better manners.

Nietzsche's *ressentiment* introduces an objection that deserves more than ceremonial acknowledgment. What if hatred becomes the organizing principle of the individual's existence? What if the enemy occupies so much of her imagination that her pleasures depend upon his defeat? What if she mistakes the intensity of opposition for the abundance of life? These are serious questions.

The reactive individual requires an enemy in order to know herself. Her values emerge from negation. Her imagined freedom depends upon the destruction of what she despises. Remove the object of hostility and the structure of her identity begins to collapse. Such an existence is not sovereign. It remains bound to the thing it opposes. But hostility alone does not establish *ressentiment*.

Nietzsche's own philosophical aggression should be sufficient to prevent so impoverished an interpretation. He did not regard every act of contempt as evidence of weakness. The question concerns the origin and organization of valuation, whether negation creates the individual's values or expresses values already possessed. I began with appetite. With the pleasures of thought,

creation, intimacy, laughter, and an existence that requires no external justification. These things do not acquire their value from the institutions that obstruct them.

If the machinery disappeared tomorrow, I would not be left empty. I would still want my books. My lovers. My impossible intellectual adventures. The freedom to make something useless and beautiful. The freedom to waste my own time. The freedom to change my mind without submitting an explanation. My desires are not the institution's property, even in opposition. This is why I can despise domination without making domination the center of my world.

And there is another difficulty in the demand that affirmative life must remain untroubled by disgust. Revulsion is not necessarily the confession of a defeated spirit. It may arise precisely because the individual possesses tastes, attachments, and desires that an arrangement offends. One does not need to worship cleanliness to recoil from filth. Nor does one need to establish a universal moral law in order to find an institution intolerable. My contempt is not an argument that everyone must feel as I do. It is an expression of my own encounter with a world I have no intention of pretending to admire.

Nietzsche asks whether contempt has become the source of my values; Stirner asks whether I have made even my contempt into a master. I will take the questions seriously. I will not kneel before them.

There is, nevertheless, something in Nietzsche's eternal recurrence that refuses easy appropriation. It is not merely an invitation to celebrate one's favorite moments. It asks whether the individual could will her existence again, in its entirety, without subtracting the humiliations, the errors, the suffering, the hours that seem to have offered nothing but exhaustion. The small man returns. The institutions return. The world I despise returns alongside the world I love. Can I still say yes?