

# The House That Fromm Built



Jonathan Keir

© 2022 Karl Schlecht Foundation (KSG)

Gutenbergstraße 4  
72631 Aichtal  
GERMANY

[www.karlschlechtstiftung.de](http://www.karlschlechtstiftung.de)

First printed 2022

Cover photo: Erich Fromm, *Liebe zum Leben*, p. 12

© Literary Estate of Erich Fromm  
(reproduced with the permission of the Erich Fromm Stiftung)

This is an open access title which permits any non-commercial use,  
distribution, and reproduction in any medium.

For the imprisoned Maria Kolesnikova, with whom I almost crossed paths. Perhaps if we had come to your aid in 2020, greater sufferings could have been avoided.

*Preserving liberal democracy is not so much a matter of legalistically defining rights and norms, as of keeping alive the 'religious character' of openness to fresh expressions of its founding intuition that all human beings are equal.*

Blake Smith

*Under standard capitalism you have a working class which is exploited during working hours, and then they go home and have time for themselves. [... Now] it is impossible to escape the vestiges of work; it follows you. [...] The most important value of liberalism, which is personal sovereignty, goes. [...] I look at today's youth, and what I find is that young people lack the sovereignty that the liberal democratic system has promised them. I see them, for instance, take on courses that they know are rubbish just to add to their CV. I see them constantly trying to improve their social ratings on Twitter, Instagram etc., because they are selling themselves - all the time. They are creating a profile, because they know that the moment they go for an interview, the panel is going to check their social media [presence]: there is a constant struggle to build up a profile along the lines of the expectations of some fictitious future employer. This is slavery, the complete collapse of the private space that liberals value.*

Yanis Varoufakis

*Fromm was particularly interested in demonstrating how society produces persons who unconsciously adapt to meet society's economic needs even though these may conflict with our emotional well-being. As Fromm would famously remark in a later work: 'It is the function of social character to shape the energies of the members of society in such a way that their behaviour is not left to conscious decisions whether or not to follow the social pattern, but that people want to act as they have to act.' [...] The point, for Fromm, is that society is always at work in the person, so that the person exists only as a fundamentally social being. [...] By virtue of our participation in society we learn to contain thoughts and feelings that might otherwise challenge the status quo. In this way, we might say that society inscribes pathology into human relationships. For Fromm, the goal of psychoanalysis was not simply to adapt to society's needs, but to embrace a more grounded and ethically centred stance - in essence, to live soundly against the stream.*

Roger Frie

*La jeunesse, c'est un naufrage. Pour en sortir il faut vieillir par la culture.  
(Youth is a shipwreck. The only rescue is to age through culture.)*

Philippe Muray

## Foreword

My boss loves Erich Fromm (1900-1980) and pays my much-needed salary, so it will be a hard job to convince you that I really believe what I'm saying here and would have written these words in another life. Aesthetic experience in our age of media overabundance requires more serendipity than ever; of the many names in the history of humanism that warrant our renewed attention, this one fell to me for reasons largely reducible to institutional accident: I administer the donations of my German employer, the Karl Schlecht Foundation, to the Erich Fromm Institute in Tübingen and the Erich Fromm Study Center at Berlin's International Psychoanalytic University. A nagging whisper of responsibility to learn more about the man behind these projects called me to think about how I could creatively *add* to them rather than merely spy on them for their elderly patron; when I was forced by the circumstances of my job to read the conclusion to Neil McLaughlin's *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology* (Bristol University Press, 2021), I realised: a) how lucky I am to have the job I have; and b) how I might actually contribute: '[Fromm's] truly cosmopolitan European vision for democratic socialism, rooted in a particular conception of the historical emergence of individualism, requires rewriting and reformulating from a global angle.'<sup>1</sup> McLaughlin allowed me to appreciate that Fromm will be remembered not primarily, or at least not only, in social psychology and sociology (fields where I have nothing to add to contemporary scientific debates), but rather as a bestselling global public intellectual and influential activist (where I have as much right to weigh in as the next citizen).

Fromm offers an all-encompassing vision of modern existence which Rainer Funk, the executor of Fromm's estate, has lovingly catalogued for posterity; younger scholars such as Thomas Kühn, meanwhile, are busy exploring the contemporary applications of Fromm's work in organisational psychology, developmental psychology and other corners of the empirical social sciences.<sup>2</sup> I won't be competing

---

<sup>1</sup> Neil McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021), p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> The International Psychoanalytic University in Berlin, where Kühn holds the Erich Fromm Endowed Professorship, organises a quarterly online reading group for Fromm scholars from around the globe. I am grateful to Prof. Kühn and the other organisers from the Erich Fromm Study Center for their permission to attend these meetings over the last year.

with such methodical erudition here, either by attempting to retell the story of Fromm's life and times or by trying to summarise, via case-study example, the overall 'relevance of Erich Fromm for [academia] today' (as the 2015 book *Towards a Human Science*, edited by Funk and McLaughlin, promises). I decided instead to flick through the Erich Fromm Institute's extensive global archive - thousands of documents in languages from *Arabiyy* to *Zhongwen* - and drill into ten capriciously chosen texts which, I hope, will show that one can be as sceptical of psychoanalysis as I am and still find meaning in 'the house that Fromm built'. My initial indifference to Fromm, and even my outright scepticism that some of his more poorly aged psychoanalytic jargon might belong outside a museum, ought not to dissuade the reader of my credentials; on the contrary, they should reassure her that this is not some zealot or fanboy writing here. That I am not a shill for murky interests, however, is a judgment she will have no choice but to reserve for the end.

My criteria in choosing the ten sources that follow in Part One were, let me stress again, the opposite of academic: '*Las Trampas de la fe*', for example, was a title upon which I gratefully seized for Chapter 3 if only thanks to my fleeting prior contact with the work of Octavio Paz.<sup>3</sup> In Part Two (Chapters 11-20), I take the liberty of inviting ten of my favourite authors into 'the house that Fromm built' with no other goal than a chemist's curiosity in seeing the reaction. I thought long and hard about adding a subtitle containing the words 'new global humanism', 'new democratic socialism' or some such synonym, but I realised I didn't need one: the figure of Fromm, hovering as a benevolent *spiritus rector* over the story much as Naguib Mahfouz, Hans Küng and Tu Weiming have done in some of my earlier books, is more than enough. The humanism in question emerges gradually in the manner of a sketched building against a landscape background; my overall artistic goal, on what happens to be the hundredth anniversary of the publication of Fromm's underexplored doctoral dissertation, was to provide an impressionistic group portrait of the intellectual descendants who have laboured in the shadow of his subsequent *oeuvre*, before inviting others to enjoy an imaginary meal at the foot of this towering edifice. More will be evoked than shown, but this is as it should be.

A final word of warning must be offered to the reader: I am a creative and loose translator, and deliberately so; this is my own

---

<sup>3</sup> See my *Peking Eulogy* (Karl Schlecht Foundation, 2020), [https://www.karl-schlecht.de/fileadmin/daten/Download/FD/FD210119\\_Peking\\_Eulogy.pdf](https://www.karl-schlecht.de/fileadmin/daten/Download/FD/FD210119_Peking_Eulogy.pdf) (accessed 12/10/2021), pp. 6-7, 134-136, 403-412.

effervescent celebration of someone else's house, not a hyperrealist replica. A more academically minded author would seek maximal conservatism in her renditions with a view to preserving the integrity of the original; at the very least, such a translator would bother to go back to a Fromm text quoted in Italian or Japanese translation and cite it in the master's idiom. On the whole, I have *not* done so; I would argue that the results of such blind retranslation and other liberties end up being quite interesting, even if there will be many points at which a scholarly reader could cry foul of both my tactics and my results. The dilemma is an unresolvable one: if you want to take 80 or 90 or 95 or 99 percent of a text and add your own twist to it, you risk either over-recognising your debts to your original sources or under-recognising them. Readers who are capable of doing so are warmly encouraged - hence the footnotes - to consult the original texts I quote in my own translations and retranslations and see exactly how I 'build on' (or 'distort') them; the whole point of a book like this, however, is to bring together and harmonise disparate voices that one feels called to unite on one's own creative terms. It will be for Fromm scholars to decide what, if any, meaningful contribution I have made to their field, but that is not the field I am ploughing. Indeed, I am not *ploughing* at all: I have the luxury of resting in the shade and playfully capturing the work of others.

Stuttgart, March 2022

## Contents

Foreword	5
Part One: Sketching the Foundations	9
1. McLaughlin: Optimal Marginality	10
2. Funk: Turkeys and Christmas	18
3. Cortina: <i>Las Trampas de la Fe</i>	30
4. Hidaka and Shimizu: Feudal Foibles	36
5. Lechhab: Socrates in Casablanca	42
6. Gurevich: Mother History	53
7. Cotta: Biophilia Redux	59
8. Librizzi: Ethical Destinies	66
9. Ai: Qiqihar Junior Teachers' College	73
10. Kolakowski: Revenge of the Sacred	79
Part Two: Invited Guests	86
11. Wallace: Mad Productivity	87
12. Luxemburg: Democratic Heart	97
13. Sábato: Second Liberations	105
14. Sōseki: Right to Laziness	113
15. Salmawy: Butterfly Effects	121
16. Dovlatov: <i>Ars Lunga</i>	130
17. Amado: Modern Miracle	139
18. Pirandello: Real Lives	153
19. Cán: Meaty Independence	163
20. Weil: Future Factory	169
Part Three: Opening Remarks	177
Epilogue: The Crystal Spirit	189

## **Part One: Sketching the Foundations**

## 1. McLaughlin: Optimal Marginality

A self-described 'democratic socialist intellectual', Neil McLaughlin is also a metasociologist, a student of academic politics with a keen sense of self-referential humour: 'Connections to the Frankfurt School, the world of clinical practice and mass market book publishing gave [Fromm] access to resources that allowed him to avoid a career in professional sociology.'<sup>4</sup> McLaughlin's *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology* (2021) traces mainstream academic jealousy in the face of Fromm's bestselling success: the 'optimal marginality' from the academic social-science mainstream which allowed Fromm to develop fresh sociological ideas and reach a public of millions in the 1950s and 1960s is, McLaughlin argues, a feature of humanistic creativity everywhere; the comparable case in our time is Jordan Peterson, whose relationship with mainstream academic psychology has proven equally fraught.<sup>5</sup> Reach too many people, in other words, and get ready to be taken down by snide, tenured critics; fall too far from the tree, however, and fertilise nothing. Like Peterson, Fromm was able to trade on his 'academic' reputation even as academics themselves repudiated his methods and conclusions; McLaughlin wants to show, however, that Fromm - even as he made his real name as a public intellectual and political activist - also fed back into the academic sociology that spurned him:

Fromm's analysis of the mechanisms of escape involved in both far-right movements and leftwing authoritarianism, his emphasis on the distorting power of the market as it permeates character and reshapes personalities, his contribution to theories of alienation and the development of humanistic Marxism, and his empirical work on the relationship between social character, alienated [labour] and economic development all brought insights and ideas into sociology.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Neil McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021), p. 231.

<sup>5</sup> McLaughlin addresses the obvious parallels between Fromm's emergence as a global public intellectual in the 1950s and the rise of Jordan Peterson to contemporary online superstar status in 'The Jordan Peterson Phenomenon: Why Fromm's Ideas and Public Intellectual Vision Is Essential for Responding to Reactionary Populism', *Fromm Forum*, v. 25, 2021, pp. 74-89.

<sup>6</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 221.

McLaughlin argues, finally, that Fromm made important contributions to both academic sociology and ‘public sociology’: ‘Fromm did more [than anyone] to bring Marxism into American sociology, with the possible exception of W.E.B. DuBois. Fromm was also pivotal in creating the template for what 20th-century public sociology might look like.’<sup>7</sup> The political engagement which sullied Fromm’s ‘scientific’ reputation was the very thing that qualified him for global public intellectualhood:

Fromm still gets between 4,000 and 5,000 citations every year in Google Scholar, well over half of which are not in English. This is a remarkable global reach not often attained in self-referential and overly parochial American sociology. [...] Fromm was a more global public sociologist who wrote in two major languages and spoke three. Fromm had a massive influence in Latin America, Eastern and Central Europe, the United Kingdom, Japan, and in German-speaking countries. For Fromm, this was never a marketing strategy. Fromm was committed to engaging scholars around the world, supporting the human rights of dissenting intellectuals in Latin America and Eastern and Central Europe, and to thinking about the world comparatively and globally. The remarkable revival of interest in Fromm’s work is truly global...<sup>8</sup>

It is worth bearing in mind that this ‘revival’ began before Fromm even died; after a period of hostile academic reviews in the late sixties and early seventies (as his public influence peaked around 1968),

the revival of Erich Fromm began with the publication of his last major book, *To Have or To Be* [in 1976]. A theoretically informed political vision for radical humanist social change, the bestselling book was published by a commercial press and had massive influence in Germany, continental Europe, and the English-speaking world. After writing *Social Character in a Mexican Village* [in 1970] and *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* [in 1973], Fromm pivoted from an analytic to a prophetic voice in *To Have or To Be*. [...] In his final years, Fromm saw himself as a prophetic and political figure who wanted not only to interpret the

---

<sup>7</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 222.

<sup>8</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 223.

world but to change it following Karl Marx's famous formulation. [...] Millions of young Germans were inspired by *To Have or To Be*, many of whom went on to create the worldwide Green movement starting with the original parliamentary party.<sup>9</sup>

McLaughlin goes on to discuss Fromm's defence of 'socialist humanists' behind the Iron Curtain, as well as the 'applied organisational research in the private sector' conducted by 'a network of scholars in and around the [German-based] Erich Fromm Society and, not to be overlooked, Fromm's 'relationship with Paolo Freire and influence on Lula's Workers' Party' in a Brazilian context.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, McLaughlin maintains, 'among elite intellectuals, and inside professional sociology in America in particular, Fromm was *persona non grata*.'<sup>11</sup> What has changed in recent years?

The rise of right-wing populism in America, Hungary, Poland and Brazil, and the growing psychological anxiety [connected to] contemporary capitalism and social media are drawing people to Fromm's insights. There were more dissertations written on Fromm in the last decade in China than in the rest of the world combined. Fromm's Marxist analysis of the alienation that comes with industrialisation and his radical humanist political critique of Stalinist and Maoist authoritarianism of one-party states is finding an audience in Asia, just as his dissenting Marxist humanism was once influential in Communist Poland, Hungary, and the former Yugoslavia.<sup>12</sup>

McLaughlin dons his metasociologist's cap, however, to make an even deeper point about Fromm's humanism:

Research universities that create knowledge about inequality have [increasingly] become expensive elitist institutions that reinforce inequality as much as challenge it. The perception of an institutional crisis in research universities is felt acutely inside the professional core of major disciplines. [...] Fromm is not an

---

<sup>9</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 224.

<sup>10</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 225.

<sup>11</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 225.

<sup>12</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 225.

outdated professional sociologist or psychologist but a major global public intellectual and public sociologist ahead of his time.<sup>13</sup>

Jordan Peterson, a favourite *bête noire*, is understood by McLaughlin as a symptom of this ongoing collapse: young people look to social media, not universities, for their 'maps of meaning'.<sup>14</sup> This abdication of responsibility for humanistic education could be partially offset, McLaughlin argues, if only contemporary 'public sociology' followed Fromm's example. After cutting his teeth on Nazism and the 'authoritarian character' in the 1930s, Fromm later

insisted on the theoretical centrality of left-wing authoritarianism, a position being taken up in an unsophisticated and reactionary way by Jordan Peterson today. Any tenable critical theory must confront the political and psychological pathologies embedded in Stalinism and its outgrowths, whether they be in the People's Republic of China or North Korea. The more diffuse left-wing authoritarianism we see on Western university campuses risks closing down a range of speakers and ideas through de-platforming instead of debating, critiquing or ignoring offensive views. Political lies are not exclusively a right-wing phenomenon. A Fromm-influenced public sociology would engage with principled conservative and moderate political voices while avoiding dogmatism through a commitment to universalistic humanism.<sup>15</sup>

Fromm's empirical work - and implicitly classist Eurocentrism - may indeed be outdated ('it is not likely that empirical studies like *Social Character in a Mexican Village* could and should be done today'<sup>16</sup>), but his broader influence as an 'optimally marginal' thought leader endures:

---

<sup>13</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 225.

<sup>14</sup> See McLaughlin, 'The Jordan Peterson Phenomenon', p. 74. The overall portrait of Peterson here is negative - more negative than I would wish to paint it - but the article as a whole covers urgent terrain for all those seeking to understand Fromm's (and Peterson's) contemporary relevance. Ralston College founder Stephen Blackwood has also repeatedly and eloquently made the point about universities' abdication of responsibility in conversation with Peterson himself, in other online fora, and in private conversations with me.

<sup>15</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 228.

<sup>16</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 228.

Fromm had insights into the power of the authoritarian character, the pathologies of narcissistic personalities and cultures, the alienation of consumer societies, and the irrationalities of nationalism. Blind spots in professional sociology, and the political consensus enforced by political and economic elites, hide these issues in plain sight.<sup>17</sup>

Fromm was nevertheless guilty of prejudices both common in his time and dangerous in ours; McLaughlin is calling for an *extension* of Fromm's work via the critical engagement of his descendants:

Fromm tended to overreach with psychoanalytic judgments, bringing them into political debates, contributing to the hollowing out of public life just as Hannah Arendt warned. A synthesis of their approaches is needed. [...] Bigotry, hatred and discrimination are real, and must be opposed morally and politically. An analysis that relies on the language of phobia, however, risks substituting the psychoanalysing of one's political opponents with the political engagement with ideas in the public sphere. Fromm was guilty of some of this when he dismissed supporters of Richard Nixon as 'necrophiliac' characters, and when he claimed that Herbert Marcuse was a nihilist who did not love life. More broadly, *Escape from Freedom* was central to creating a social science framework for thinking about populism as xenophobia. This is a classic double-edged sword. There *are* emotional logics operating in the current polarised political climate, and ultimately Fromm's insights into the social psychology of authoritarianism of both left and right are valuable. But he also contributed to what Philip Rieff famously called the 'triumph of the therapeutic' that helped both to depoliticise and polarise societies.<sup>18</sup>

McLaughlin nevertheless counsels a return to Fromm not only as a thinker in his own right, but above all as an example of an endangered species of free-thinking intellectual:

---

<sup>17</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, pp. 229-230.

<sup>18</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, pp. 230-231.

Fromm acquired fame comparable to that of Margaret Mead in the 1930s, Noam Chomsky after 9/11, and, on the political right, Jordan Peterson today. [...] Fromm was successful in avoiding the hyper-professionalism of contemporary sociology, managing to write persuasively outside of closed scholarly networks. We need more research into the conditions that make this kind of work possible. We are immersed today in social media along with a decline in tenured jobs, issues that raise important questions for research on the reproduction of public sociological careers. Fromm avoided the battle for a tenure-track job by working with the Frankfurt School and doing therapy before bursting onto the scene with *Escape from Freedom*. The academic, publishing and therapy fields are structured differently today. Many young scholars today planning for professional success in sociology, politics, and public intellectual life must make disciplined choices in a risky and competitive environment.<sup>19</sup>

McLaughlin remains vaguely and almost oddly optimistic: 'Ambitiously aiming beyond narrow professionalism paid off for Fromm and will do so for younger scholars today even in a very different historical context.'<sup>20</sup> But the crucial luxury - which a certain no-strings form of academic tenure used to provide - was insurance against 'reputational costs', which allowed Fromm to realise his full 'intellectual value' as a 'challenger of all orthodoxies': 'Young people all around the world,' moreover, 'especially outside the United States, were inspired by him for decades precisely because he rejected the narrow professionalism and expert tone so deadly to real dialogue between intellectuals and the public.'<sup>21</sup> Fromm was able to enjoy being a free activist, but also 'a public psychoanalyst, a spiritual prophetic thinker and a therapist [as well as] a scholar.'<sup>22</sup> Although these roles 'sit uneasily with sociology's core mission'<sup>23</sup>, this fundamental freedom from institutional constraint

---

<sup>19</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, pp. 232-233.

<sup>20</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 233.

<sup>21</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 233.

<sup>22</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 234.

<sup>23</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 234.

allowed Fromm to pick and choose his humanistic sources without having to think twice about his career:

Ultimately a German-Jewish intellectual of his generation, Fromm drew on Buddhist insights and Muslim poets, and identified with the centuries-long struggles for liberation from colonial and then American domination in Latin America. [...] The sociological imagination is powerful but it will not be enough on its own to allow us to understand and change the world. If we don't systematically draw on the insights of other disciplines while also getting outside of the very academic system itself, then the sociological promise that C. Wright Mills wrote so eloquently about will come to naught. [...] Going beyond both Freudian and sociological orthodoxies cost [Fromm] in terms of his reputation [among Freudians and sociologists] but improved the quality of his ideas.<sup>24</sup>

Fromm was a free thinker and hence capable of pessimism, but above all his work is

a major resource for the humanist intellectual movement today, a counterweight to the despair and nihilism so many are experiencing. [...] Fromm's public sociology was clearly and unambiguously left-wing but avoided simplistic political orthodoxies. His intellectual vision and courage can be seen [already] in his early work with the Horkheimer circle when he insisted on the existence of left-wing authoritarianism, a controversial position among critical theorists. [...] Fromm's framework does not lead to despair or political apathy because he rejects the view that destruction, violence and inequality are inevitable.<sup>25</sup>

Fromm's unabashed and unscholarly 'commitment to hope, humanism and political engagement'<sup>26</sup> can improve scholars and layfolk alike, and it can certainly improve the quality of public debate about big and complex topics such as, for instance, the rise of China:

---

<sup>24</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, pp. 234-235.

<sup>25</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 236.

<sup>26</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 236.

Fromm understood full well the role that Chinese communists played in decolonisation and addressing the poverty of billions. [...] It is crucial to avoid simple ahistorical moralism. Yet if left-wing public sociologists do not stand against one-party states and the brutality of the Chinese regime today, and if they fail to raise questions about the far softer, but still serious problem of excessive authoritarianism on campus, space is opened for conservative reaction.<sup>27</sup>

What matters here is the courage to hold one's own interests - professional, political - at bay. McLaughlin's Fromm offers a lasting humanist model - not perfect, but who is? - of *how* to think, not a trendy leftist manifesto of *what* to think.

---

<sup>27</sup> McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology*, p. 233.

## 2. Funk: Turkeys and Christmas

*That morning, I read that Google is developing a language model with a trillion parameters, six times larger than GPT-3. OpenAI, meanwhile, had used GPT-3's architecture to create an image generator that could produce anything you asked for, including bizarre mash-ups — avocado armchairs, snail harps. It was called DALL-E, a nod to the Surrealist painter. I read an interview with a pop star who'd collaborated with another AI model on some recent compositions and who speculated that in the future, neural nets trained on our musical canon would produce superhuman melodies far superior to anything we'd ever heard. These were important times for creative people, and the stakes were only going to get higher. It's sort of like the last time when we're not going to be competing against gods to make art.<sup>28</sup>*

Meghan O'Gieblyn

No one has manned the watchtower of the house that Fromm built with greater hedgehog diligence than Rainer Funk; dilettantish foxes like me can only marvel at such singularity of purpose. It may seem absurd to bite off and chew a mere five-page working paper for management consultants from the flank of Funk's Frommian *Lebensaufgabe* here, but life's enabling constraints threw the two of us together in a very specific context: Funk is the executor of Fromm's estate, while the foundation which supports the Erich Fromm Institute and Erich Fromm Study Centre, and for which I now work, seeks to weaponise Fromm for the purposes of 'improving leadership in business and society through humanistic values.' As I searched the institute's archives (partly financed by the Karl Schlecht Foundation) for background on Fromm's brutal excommunication from the Frankfurt School, it was Funk who reminded me that a deep-pocketed admirer, Felix Weil, had also bankrolled much of the school's early activity. Weil, however, was the Marxist son of a wealthy merchant; Karl Schlecht is a first-generation capitalist baron, a product of the postwar German *Wirtschaftswunder* and *bona fide*

---

<sup>28</sup> Meghan O'Gieblyn, 'Babel', <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-40/essays/babel-4/>, Issue 40, Summer 2021 (accessed 12/10/2021). O'Gieblyn quotes the Canadian musician Grimes here.

embodiment of the 'authoritarian character' against which Fromm directly railed. Why would such a *Persönlichkeit* possibly wish to promote the work of a rabble-rousing left-wing psychoanalyst? Like millions of others, Schlecht reported transformational contact with Fromm's bestseller *The Art of Loving*; freed from bourgeois financial constraint, the workaholic *Unternehmer* fixed increasingly over the years on the elusive existential goal of a self-determined, intrinsically motivated *vita activa*. The mission of the Karl Schlecht Foundation is to encourage new generations to seek this freedom from consumeristic wage slavery - *Liebe zum eigenen Tun*, as Schlecht likes to call it - for themselves.

Schlecht's dream - or at least my own rose-tinted interpretation of that dream - is an economy driven entirely by the labour of self-directing, free individuals. The 1932-born concrete-pump mogul's Swabian pietism, however, should not be lost on posterity: what Schlecht envisages is the opposite of a frivolous and endless party. Such a sacralisation of work among free peoples will require a special kind of management genius: the great boss will not subject you to humiliating public endorsements of the company's propaganda, but will somehow both stimulate you with new ideas and liberate you to dig critically into your own well and find, without fear of ostracism and death by starvation for heresy, your own uncoerced reasons to contribute to the common undertaking at hand (not everything worth doing, after all, can be achieved by individuals working on their own). In the case of the Karl Schlecht Foundation, the collective *Unternehmen* in question is - to repeat - 'the improvement of leadership in business and society through humanistic values'; other organisations - including for-profit firms - will have equally noble goals that free human beings will choose to serve in return for fair remuneration and humane treatment. Not many of us live in this world of redeemed work, but the dream of it has conjoined people as diverse as Karl Schlecht, Rainer Funk and myself in common cause.

Summoned to prepare a short paper for the patron on '*Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für Führen und Beraten*' ('The Importance of Psychoanalysis for Leadership and Consultancy'), Funk dutifully obliged, revealing an already familiar conclusion: Fromm's real legacy is the opposite of a saleable lifehack; it is a '*kritischer Blick*'<sup>29</sup>, an ability to ask uncomfortable questions of, well, everyone and everything, including the sacred sources of tradition, the elders and ancestors. For

---

<sup>29</sup> Rainer Funk, '*Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für Führen und Beraten*', Working Paper for the Karl Schlecht Foundation ([www.ksfn.de](http://www.ksfn.de)), October 2021, p. 5.

Fromm, this meant starting, in his doctoral thesis, with his own Jewish heritage<sup>30</sup>; by the end of the 1920s he was even taking on the revered Jewish godfather of psychoanalysis himself. As a trained sociologist in a postdoctoral program for budding psychotherapists, Fromm quickly became aware that the Freudians had downplayed the socially mediated nature of selfhood. Without wishing to diminish individual subjectivity - and on the contrary, seeking to dignify and ennoble it - the young Fromm practised a kind of psychoanalytic population medicine, addressing, in Funk's handy summation, 'the motivational forces that make *large numbers* of people think, feel and act in similar ways.'<sup>31</sup> Of particular concern were the 'irrational and dysfunctional' forms of repression which the 1900-born Fromm first encountered as a boy in Germany, just young enough to avoid the front, during the First World War: the collective 'enthusiasm' with which so many Germans jumped into the war effort - 'even as the bodies piled up' - would 'profoundly mark' Fromm's own development and underscore his lifelong interest in sociological and social-psychological phenomena.<sup>32</sup> The rise of German National Socialism, culminating in Adolf Hitler's election victory in 1933, posed a direct existential threat, but it also kindly allowed Fromm to deepen his professional understanding of 'leader cults, authoritarian submission and anti-semitic racialist ideology.'<sup>33</sup> The middle term - 'authoritarian submission' - was a headscratcher for me; Funk was nice enough to take me aside one afternoon in Tübingen and explain how Fromm came to view authoritarian leaders and their willing subjects as two sides of the same dysfunctional coin, even as the sociologist in him recognised that reactionary forces are *always* at work shaping the 'socially typical character' necessary for the 'maintenance of a particular economy, culture or social grouping.'<sup>34</sup> My innate and partly subconscious hostility to sociology prevents me from eating the whole Marxist meal here, but Funk's example - offered here to consultants and future leaders in a 21st-century market economy - is uncontroversial:

---

<sup>30</sup> See Funk's Foreword to Erich Fromm, *Das jüdische Gesetz: Zur Soziologie des Diaspora-Judentum*, (Basel: Beltz Verlag, 1989), pp. 9-13. We return to Fromm's doctoral thesis itself in Part Three.

<sup>31</sup> Funk, 'Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für Führen und Beraten', p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> See Funk, 'Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für Führen und Beraten', p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Funk, 'Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für Führen und Beraten', p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Funk, 'Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für Führen und Beraten', p. 2.

People who live in authoritarian systems, for example, [tend to] repress their own wills and powers of judgment and find everything the Religion, Party or *Führer* says *wunderbar*. That these individuals are so genuinely enthusiastic about what the idealised authority prescribes, however, is the result of an authoritarian character education where everything decreed by the authority in question is presented - and experienced - as normal, true, correct and reasonable. The subject's autonomous - and potentially conflicting - powers of judgment and free will are actively repressed. If the convictions of a group motivated by such authoritarian drives are critically questioned, violent reactions will be undertaken in order to keep the repressed [powers of will and judgment] from the door.<sup>35</sup>

If I may dare to translate this into layman's terms: people often make such good excuses for themselves, and for the groups to which they belong (and from which they draw private advantages), that they don't even let their own consciences in on the swindle. Whether the fear is of physical violence, loss of financial security, or some other perceived injury, the path of least psychic resistance, once one has calculated that the potential costs of dissent are intolerable, is simply to swallow the official propaganda, perhaps never quite in its entirety, but at least enough to get through the waking and working day (we will be covering Fromm's reception of Orwell and his take on Doublethink in due course). Funk is arguing in this short paper that managers and consultants - in our 21st-century global market economy as never before - have a responsibility both to understand these social-psychoanalytic dynamics and to embody a spirit of anti-totalitarian resistance in their own behaviour. Figuring out how exactly to make this happen when managers are beholden to bosses and shareholders for their performance-contingent salaries, annual bonuses and so on is the central challenge of any serious 'corporate psychoanalysis' - no mean feat when the 'social system' in question is so busy plying these leaders with advantages.

Funk is optimistic, as his mentor was, that 'what is good for individual people, their relationships with each other and collective well-being as a whole' can be harmonised into a single 'biophilic' song if only individual people are liberated, in Funk's Germanic idiom, to 'develop

---

<sup>35</sup> Funk, 'Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für Führen und Beraten', pp. 2-3.

and differentiate their own cognitive, emotional and imaginative capabilities. Only this will allow individuals to develop their own attachments autonomously, [...] and only this will allow them to be optimally just in their dealings with others.’<sup>36</sup> In the last hundred years, however, a series of social-psychological obstacles has arisen to thwart - or rather to continue to thwart - humanity’s progress towards such humanism. Fromm’s work on the authoritarian character in the 1930s - the ‘socially typical’ basic striving for dominance (active) or safe submission (passive) - was naturally centred on Germany (even as it had global implications), but the ‘marketing orientation’ which Fromm identified as the emerging ‘socially typical character’ in his adopted 1940s America was, in an age of rapid economic globalisation and Allied victory in the Second World War, a genuinely international social-psychological phenomenon, perhaps even the first of its kind:

The energies of such a character are oriented towards how she can best sell her wares [on a global market], but above all how she can best sell her main ware, *herself*, and thereby join the small circle of ‘winners’. The background to this new orientation of human thought, emotion and action in ‘the many’ was the change in the nature of markets unleashed by the Industrial Revolution, after which the [global] exchange value, not the [local] use value of a product became decisive, in particular those additions to the exchange value which had little or nothing to do with the product itself. The ‘marketing question’ was internalised by increasing numbers of people in such a way that it came to characterise individual relationships, and even individual structures of thought, emotion and action. What mattered most in this brave new world [where so much profit via more or less egregious marketing was now possible] was not who a person really is, what characteristics and qualities she has, but [...] what role she can outwardly play. Costumes and theatre come to matter above all. ‘Success’ in such a world can only come at the expense of direct contact with oneself, namely via a repression of everything that gets in the way [of the ideal image to be presented to one’s employers and/or customers]: this includes antipathy and aggression towards others, and

---

<sup>36</sup> Funk, ‘*Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für Führen und Beraten*’, p. 3.

above all, negative feelings towards oneself - fear, powerlessness, self-doubt.<sup>37</sup>

The most obvious symptom of this 'dysfunctional' character orientation at the individual level is consumerism: in an attempt to counter the void of 'self-alienation' opened up by subservience to the dictates of the market ('I am only worth what others are willing to pay for me'), the subject doubles down on the meagre compensations the market itself can provide (luxury status symbols etc.). In organisations, meanwhile, the dysfunction manifests as a 'permanent success orientation' in order to 'beat off the competition':

The development of ever new and innovative marketing strategies becomes a matter of life and death [for the organisation]. In the era of climate change, for example, firms must now be packaged as sustainable and ecologically friendly. How the organisation *actually* operates should never be shown to the outside world: what matters, exclusively, are the values it proclaims.

In order to counter the dangerous human side-effects of this marketing orientation and give individual people any real shot at being themselves, organisational structures must be reformed in such a way as to allow experiences of self-realisation via the exercise of one's own free mental powers. This means, among other things, that judgments perceived as potentially success-limiting, critical or negative - of colleagues as of oneself - must somehow be allowed to flow.<sup>38</sup>

This would be hard enough if it were the end of the story, but Funk identifies two further *Sozialcharakter-Orientierungen* - organically related to the marketing orientation but also distinct from it - that have mushroomed around the world in recent decades. The first of these - the *narzisstischer Sozialcharakter* - was identified by Fromm himself in the 1960s: 'This individual strives above all to achieve her own prominence, and loses interest in everything which cannot be ascribed to feed the lustre of her own ego. The "other" is all that which cannot be attributed to this magnificence (hence why narcissism is typically accompanied by

---

<sup>37</sup> Funk, 'Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für Führen und Beraten', p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Funk, 'Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für Führen und Beraten', p. 4.

the debasement of “foreigners” and other friend-enemy distinctions).’<sup>39</sup> Or as Funk cites Fromm elsewhere: ‘The narcissistic person has built an invisible wall around himself. He is everything, the world is nothing. Or rather: He is the world.’<sup>40</sup> Funk’s own work on ‘narcissistic character formations’ illustrates how and why a person, or indeed many people, might become so in our time:

Undoubtedly, major economic and social changes in the capitalist market economy play a crucial role in explaining the widespread formation of the narcissistic social character. [...] In the marketing of one’s own personality, an orientation around success in the marketplace is usually only possible at the expense of an authentic sense of identity, because success is dependent upon the adoption of marketable personality traits. [...] The marketing of one’s personality means turning oneself into a product for purchase, and for that reason one trains those personal traits with which one can succeed in a particular market - independent of one’s own personal characteristics, capacities, and problems. Anything that could interfere with economic aspirations of success is to be put aside, repressed, and denied. In reality, as we have seen, the marketing orientation corrupts any sense of identity and impedes the [subject’s] ability [...] to experience its own powers as a part of [a] coherent self. [...] Narcissistic character formations always come at the expense of any genuine interest in other people and everything that goes beyond the comfortably familiar. They represent, even in their weak form, a major obstacle to the capacity to grow psychologically. Man can only grow psychologically when he is capable of breaking new ground, and when he wants to become familiar with what is foreign - in others and in himself.<sup>41</sup>

To the extent, in short, that people are forced to weigh the market value of their educations (whether by raw economic need, social pressure or some mixture of the two), they will suppress their own desires and critical faculties to the point that they lose their natural ‘childlike curiosity’, in which Frommian freedom and equality largely consists, and

---

<sup>39</sup> Funk, ‘*Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für Führen und Beraten*’, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> See Rainer Funk, ‘The Narcissistic Character’, *Fromm Forum*, vol. 25, 2021, p. 90.

<sup>41</sup> Funk, ‘The Narcissistic Character’, pp. 99-102.

put themselves instead to learning what the market will reward. Trump-style narcissism is thus the logical extension of the 'marketing orientation': if I take my cues exclusively from the market and learn to change like the wind with it, I become less and less interested in whatever the market (i.e. the world) is actually saying today; I believe whatever I believe primarily because it is convenient to do so, not because of any deeper felt connection between the truth of the world and the meaning of my own identity within it.

The very idea of a 'Frommian organisational psychology' is hence a kind of oxymoron: it is only when individuals are liberated from the pressures of the marketplace (by means of a guaranteed income of some kind, housing rights and so on, as well as a certain cultural education) that they can commit to a life of 'productivity' on their own properly autonomous terms. Any firm with an instrumental hiring policy - in other words, any firm that ever placed a job ad with a list of required competencies with a view to choosing the 'most suitable candidate' after evaluating all the applications - fundamentally violates this notion of productivity from the very beginning of every new employee relationship. The message, while seldom publicly stated (except perhaps by Donald Trump on *The Apprentice*), could not be clearer: 'You have been rigorously selected - carefully pulled from the flock - in the expectation that you will excel above all other candidates in doing precisely what we want you to do. You will hence be rewarded by us based on your degree of compliance with *our* wishes, not *your* sense of meaning or justice.' In such a society (and in how many 21st-century societies are first-time job-seekers *not* confronted with such a panorama of options?), the noble *junzi* who studies what she wants to study and refuses to worry what the market will think of her<sup>42</sup> (and who therefore isn't striving vigorously and cynically to build up her own brand profile) is either 'independently wealthy' to some degree or a fool who will end up having to make a half-baked 'MacDonald's compromise'<sup>43</sup> of some kind - or in a worst-case

---

<sup>42</sup> The ideal of the Confucian *junzi* is laid out in the very first words of the *Analects*: 'Isn't it a pleasure to study and practice what you have learned? [...] If people do not recognize me and it doesn't bother me, am I not a *noble man*?' The deep and global cultural problem posed by the rise of the modern 'attention economy' for 21st-century humanistic 'learning for the self' is being confronted by a new generation of Confucian scholars following in the footsteps of Tu Weiming, Tang Junyi and other 20th-century New Confucians. I am currently part of an international team working on an English translation of the 1970-born Tang Wenming's *Yu Ming yu Ren* (Hebei University Press, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> As the 21st-century joke about humanities graduates goes, 'Would you like fries with that?' is the most common philosophical question we now ask.

scenario, starving. Funk summarises the bind, however, from the opposite end:

Only a few marketing-oriented people are truly aware of the fact that their positive sense of identity and self-worth is in growing measure completely dependent on a response of success, and barely has anything to do any longer with one's own interests, feelings, desires, and capacities. [...] A deficient sense of identity usually remains unconscious, because the echo of [market] success allows one to experience a feeling of self-worth. If success is likely to remain absent, or, for whatever reasons, really never [arrives], then the development of narcissistic fantasies of grandeur are often the chosen method to avoid a mental breakdown.

The interesting point here is not so much whether narcissistic compensation develops only after the absence of success or before. [...] What is decisive is that the marketing-oriented person does not experience himself and his self-worth based on the exercise of his own powers, but rather obtains these experiences externally and thereby suffers from a deficient self.<sup>44</sup>

Narcissism, however - that now much overused and increasingly nebulous word - is not even the end of it anymore; Funk has lived long enough to witness the birth of a subtly new and even more extreme phenomenon, another delightful outgrowth of modernity:

From a social-psychoanalytic perspective, a new social character orientation has since developed. Its fundamental goal is no longer success, but rather the wish to do everything new and differently, with autonomy: we should have the independence to construct our limited surrounding reality, but also our own limited personality, anew and differently. I call this the 'ego-orientation'. This new social character formation is unthinkable without what we describe as the 'digital revolution'. [...] Digital technology, electronic media, and networking technology have made possible new products and production methods that show us at every turn how man-made digital, electronic and media marvels

---

<sup>44</sup> Funk, 'The Narcissistic Character', p. 100.

have the capacity to do so much more than man ever could with his own physical, emotional and intellectual powers.

[...] In the ego-oriented character, there is a sort of symbiosis with, and existential dependence on, technological capability. [...] As long as we have this technological capability at our disposal, an impending incapacity - namely, the inability to draw any longer on our own cognitive and emotional strengths - does not surface. In the marketing orientation, 'success' is the cure that prevents any awareness of our loss of self; in the ego orientation, the medium is the cure that protects us from feeling unmotivated, empty, and isolated.<sup>45</sup>

The uniqueness of Funk's extension of Fromm into the 21st Century lies in his ability to measure the various symptoms of a 'dysfunctional' modernity against the yardstick of a single humanism:

Every narcissistic character formation - also that of group narcissism - represents a psychically nonproductive processing of experiences of devaluation. The contemporary problem lies above all in the actual devaluation of one's own capacities of growth in the face of a suggestive promotion of the superiority of technological solutions and in their actual superiority in certain areas, which is barely absorbed at a conscious level. The increase in narcissistic character formations shows that man unconsciously feels himself a failure and, without success and technological capabilities at his disposal, helpless and powerless. [...] The most diverse forms of narcissism are - simply put - nonproductive because they strongly reduce the interest in and for the other.<sup>46</sup>

Funk concludes his short paper '*Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für Führen und Beraten*' with the following two sentences: 'Fromm's social-psychoanalysis [...] enables us to cast a critical eye on modes of social organisation, economic activity, and managerial thought which are taken to be "normal". The training of such a critical eye is an integral part of any serious leadership curriculum or training program for management

---

<sup>45</sup> Funk, 'The Narcissistic Character', p. 101.

<sup>46</sup> Funk, 'The Narcissistic Character', pp. 101-102.

consultants.’<sup>47</sup> The challenge, it should by now go without saying, is how on Earth to educate a class of ‘professional’ which is itself in thrall to the ‘marketing orientation’ and all that comes with it: managers and consultants must soil themselves on the labour market just as much as, and perhaps even more than, the next person (otherwise they will have no one left to manage or counsel). If good leadership on Frommian terms consists in the liberation of staff for ‘productive’ (i.e. autonomously defined) service of organisational goals, then masochistic clichés like ‘leading from behind’ and ‘turning the pyramid upside down’ (while still being paid many times more than one’s employees) look just as wrong-headed as attempts to pull underlings along with a charlatanic ‘shared vision’: the only real job of ‘leaders’ in a radically humanistic Frommian economy is to encourage one’s comrades to cultivate their own best selves; any active top-down ‘quality control’ function or bonus system for exemplary compliance is implicitly authoritarian. Pastoral care - *not* as a means to the end of greater worker efficiency, but for its own sake - is the exact opposite of what modern post-Taylor management is commonly understood to be, and yet Funk is clear that this enlargement of others is precisely what managers (and their consultants) should always be aiming for, not the excessive remuneration which the market overallocates to them because they are perceived to be adding significant value.

Rather than inventing ever cleverer carrots and sticks to tease desired and measurable results out of a passive flock, the true Frommian leader above all strengthens her team members’ desire ‘to become familiar with what is foreign - in others and in oneself.’<sup>48</sup> Implicit in this worldview is the trust that such an individual, wherever she is in an organisation’s structure (everyone is a ‘leader’ on this definition), and busy as she is with her own self-cultivation via direct and curious engagement with the world, will nevertheless spontaneously fulfil any necessary group functions (i.e. ‘work’) as a matter of course without needing to be coaxed or threatened, and with a greater degree of efficiency and happiness than if she were motivated by external ‘success’ (recognition, superfluous money, status etc.). The ‘worker’ of the future, in other words, will not measure the value of her own ‘production’ against the market - or worse, against the artificial intelligences looming to outdo her - but always against her own hard-

---

<sup>47</sup> Funk, *‘Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für Führen und Beraten’*, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Funk, *‘The Narcissistic Character’*, p. 102.

won standards of human excellence and meaning, which can only be formed in curious and critical contact with the best of global cultural tradition. The catch with such lifelong humanistic education, of course, is that the citizen must be guaranteed what she regards as a sufficient income before she can really relax and enjoy it; otherwise the Siren's call of the 'marketing orientation' - with its tantalising get-rich-quick promise of just such financial independence - will continue to require a certain not easily sustainable heroism to resist. From this vantage-point, Frommian 'democratic socialism' looks like little more than the enduring provision of the universal and equal right to define one's contribution to society from a stable fortress of long-term economic and social security. Like all universal rights, this implies corresponding responsibilities for people somewhere; such socialism won't, I would argue, be cheap, but by the standards of early 21st-century developed countries (the wealthiest human societies of all time), it isn't so unimaginably expensive as to be permanently utopian. But let us continue sketching the foundations of 'the house that Fromm built', and which Rainer Funk has immaculately preserved, before we start jumping up and down on the roof.

### 3. Cortina: *Las Trampas de la fe*

*In my own work, I have often described the social learning techniques of chimpanzees as education by master-apprenticeship. Mothers and other adults take on the role of the master. The young chimpanzees in the community learn by carefully observing the behavior of the masters. Observational learning has three important aspects: the master models behavior but does not actively teach it; the apprentice has a strong and intrinsic motivation to copy the behavior; and, importantly, the masters are tolerant toward their apprentices while they learn.*<sup>49</sup>

Tetsuro Matsuzawa

Mauricio Cortina's short review of Víctor Saavedra's 1994 book *La promesa incumplida de Erich Fromm* (*Erich Fromm's Broken Promise*) presses the limits of our psychiatric expertise, but I hope to show that the lay reader can extract a couple of valuable kernels for her purposes:

In my view, the fundamental problem with Fromm's clinical practice lay in the fact that his work as an analyst was obscured by his efforts to become a prophet of psychoanalysis. Fromm's goal was to produce radical change in his patients and disciples, to the point of transforming them into 'revolutionary characters'; he thereby hoped they would join his crusade for a socialist humanism. The individual patient, alas, was often sacrificed to this messianic project. I completely agree with Saavedra on this.<sup>50</sup>

Every political movement risks instrumentalising its individual members in a way that no thoroughgoing humanist creed could ever abide: the fate of the individual human being is somehow more precious than the promotion of any -ism. The challenge for humanist intellectuals, then, is

---

<sup>49</sup> Tetsuro Matsuzawa, 'Primate Memory', <https://inference-review.com/article/primate-memory>, Vol. 6, No. 3, October 2021 (accessed 19/10/2021).

<sup>50</sup> Mauricio Cortina, '*Las Trampas de la Fe*', *Subjetividad y cultura*, No. 4 (Abril 1995), p. 92.

how to package this respect for the individual without undermining the very autonomous individuality one is seeking to promote in the first place.<sup>51</sup> Cortina singles out the Frommian notion of ‘activity’ here, defending the master from those who would dismiss his ‘Marxist epistemology’ as ideological.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, however, Cortina agrees with Saavedra that ‘Fromm, by accentuating the importance of the social dimension of character formation, ends up minimising the unique and idiosyncratic elements which shape specific patients.’<sup>53</sup> Instead of casting Fromm aside, however, Cortina thinks it ‘would be prudent to recognise the excesses of both positions.’<sup>54</sup> Fromm hence played an important corrective role in the history of psychoanalysis: ‘Fromm’s [social-psychological] critiques of psychoanalytic orthodoxy - by no means caricatures - are a reaction to its exaggerations.’<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, however, Fromm will be remembered for more than this, even if his success was not uniform in all areas:

Fromm recognised [...] that history invariably reflects an imbalance between the struggle to advance certain legitimate human aspirations and the socio-economic conditions that limit or deform them. As in many aspects of Fromm’s work, we encounter a contradiction here between what [Michael] Maccoby has defined as Fromm’s ‘analytic’ and ‘prophetic’ voices. The analytic voice uncovers the conscious and unconscious elements of the past which explain the present. The prophetic voice sketches a possible future and is an expression of hope.

In his best moments, Fromm’s two voices harmonise with each other: the result is both a profound view of reality and a fresh vision of the morrow. His analysis of fascism, his revision and transcendence [...] of Freud’s concept of man, and his

---

<sup>51</sup> I have written about two global public intellectuals - Hans Küng and Tu Weiming - who sought just such packaging with their respective *Weltethos* and ‘Spiritual Humanism’ projects; the current book - with its ‘radical humanist’ Fromm *leitmotif* - might be considered the third instalment in a loose trilogy. See <https://www.karl-schlecht.de/download/fd-foundation-docs/> (accessed 21/10/2021) for these earlier efforts, *From Global Ethic to World Ethos?* (2018) and *Peking Eulogy* (2020), as well as *Four Humanisms in One Day* (2021), which brings together Héctor Abad Faciolince, Varlam Shalamov, Oe Kenzaburo and May Ziadé.

<sup>52</sup> See Cortina, ‘*Las Trampas de la Fe*’, p. 92.

<sup>53</sup> Cortina, ‘*Las Trampas de la Fe*’, p. 91.

<sup>54</sup> Cortina, ‘*Las Trampas de la Fe*’, pp. 91-92.

<sup>55</sup> Cortina, ‘*Las Trampas de la Fe*’, p. 91.

reading of the Bible are examples of such harmony. At other points in Fromm's *oeuvre*, however, the two voices work against each other: moralising supplants analysis.<sup>56</sup>

Cortina partially defends Fromm against Saavedra's charges of expert hubris: although Fromm 'never doubted his role as an expert [psychoanalyst]', such self-confidence was scarcely unique to the Frommian circle.<sup>57</sup> Saavedra's Lacanian hitjob on Fromm is ultimately a 'disappointment' because it fails to 'explain the discrepancy between a radical humanist analysis of Fromm and the reality of a project which never quite took root, a project yet to be fully elaborated.'<sup>58</sup> Cortina's reference to Octavio Paz's biography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz - *Las Trampas de la Fe* - may be understood as a warning to Lacanians like Saavedra not to get caught up in the 'traps of faith' particular to their own schools, but the allusion to Sor Juana (and to Paz's heroic depiction of her) is also as an optimistic reference to the power of Fromm's own intellectual courage.

Like Sor Juana, in other words, Fromm may be remembered as a canonical pioneer of modern humanism. Fromm's desire for a radical humanist overhaul of modern society, however, affected the objectivity (and hence the quality) of his scientific research, and also, Cortina and Saavedra agree, his one-on-one clinical work as a humanistic psychoanalyst (as a contemporary Netflix series like the Turkish *Ethos* shows, no prole 'patient' will react well to becoming the predictable and generic 'subject' of expert dissection or the vehicle for the promotion of a theory; mutual vulnerability is a prerequisite for any successful relationship). The quality of Fromm's work as an analyst<sup>59</sup>, however, does not concern me here as much as the danger or 'trap' inherent in any politicised humanism: as soon as individuals are subsumed under the umbrella of an idea or wider social cause, it is checkmate for humane dialogue, and by extension for most forms of individual 'psychotherapy'. The desire for wide-reaching structural change among social scientists and practitioners may be natural and healthy, but it

---

<sup>56</sup> Cortina, '*Las Trampas de la Fe*', p. 91.

<sup>57</sup> See Cortina, '*Las Trampas de la Fe*', p. 91.

<sup>58</sup> Cortina, '*Las Trampas de la Fe*', p. 90.

<sup>59</sup> Matheus Romanetto, the current Visiting Scholar at the Erich Fromm Institut Tübingen, is busy exploring this important corner of the archives, as well as Fromm's pioneering work on interreligious dialogue (discussed further in Chapter 5).

would be absurd to think there are any instrumental or scientific shortcuts to it: human beings are educated one at a time, and no amount of social reform or social-psychological insight could ever obviate the need for such individuated care.

This 'radical humanist' mantra of attention to individuals - the astute refusal to instrumentalise them for even the best seeming causes - not only applies to scientists and therapists; it also extends, as we saw in the previous chapter, to everyday personnel management. Klaus Leisinger addresses the question of the possibility of such humanistic leadership in his *Die Kunst der verantwortungsvollen Führung* (2018), roughly half of which is devoted to Fromm's legacy for 21st-century global business. 'Can a firm in global competition be led successfully with love?' Leisinger asks, fully aware that Fromm is calling for nothing less than a transformation of a business world where the instrumentalisation of human beings for corporate ends is standard practice: 'Both the economy and society as a whole must, Fromm contends, be oriented towards the needs of the unalienated individual, who is focused on being rather than having.'<sup>60</sup> In an even shorter formulation, Leisinger describes 'a healthy economy for healthy people' as the goal of his, and Fromm's, efforts.<sup>61</sup> Cortina's critique of Fromm's work as an analyst reminds the reader of Leisinger's book that 'trustbuilding management in international business' (Leisinger's subtitle) can only begin with an attitude that places the individual employee or customer above any collective result; the entire edifice of instrumental rationality on which 21st-century corporate culture is built is in fact threatened by such *a priori* attention to individual health. The 'Enlightenment mentality'<sup>62</sup> on which the modern world has been built - the mania for technology-driven economic progress and measurable 'results' - can scarcely be wished away altogether; Fromm's 'radical humanist' bet is that such results will be improved, or at least only acceptably harmed, by refusing to sacrifice individuals or entire social classes of alienated modern workers to them. Business ethicists and management specialists who call on Fromm to argue for sustainable, proletarian-friendly solutions to collective problems must heed Cortina's

---

<sup>60</sup> Klaus Leisinger, *Die Kunst der verantwortungsvollen Führung: Vertrauen schaffendes Management im internationalen Business*, (Bern: Haupt, 2018, p. 64.

<sup>61</sup> Leisinger, *Die Kunst der verantwortungsvollen Führung*, p. 64.

<sup>62</sup> See, for instance, Tu Weiming's 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', in his 2010 collection *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity* (New Delhi: CSC).

warning - issued to 'therapists' of all stripes - that enthusiasm for socioeconomic reform and aggregate 'impact' must never outstrip concern for the spiritual welfare of each individual. Leisinger summarises this Frommian warning (which, as Cortina and Saavedra remind us, Fromm himself did not always fully heed) in the following terms: 'Irrational authority is rooted in physical or spiritual force, the purpose of which is to exploit people in one form or another.'<sup>63</sup> Fromm, meanwhile, defines 'rational authority' as the ability to help others with their freely chosen tasks; in Leisinger's ideal organisation, 'proven competence' in a given field leads to justified promotions in the hierarchy to which all members are freely tied:

Mature human beings should not allow their deserved position in a hierarchy to degenerate into the exercise of irrational authority, where the dignity of individual colleagues is compromised and respect for their autonomy is lost. According to Fromm, such individuated attention to human beings is 'impossible without really *knowing* who they are. Care and responsibility for other human beings is blind and meaningless if it is not guided by informed recognition of their specificity.'<sup>64</sup>

In saying that Fromm's own practice as a psychoanalyst doesn't interest me, what I really mean is that his humanism can be explored and enjoyed independent of it. It is, moreover, the whole idea of the psychoanalytic couch (as opposed to, say, the library, café or bar) that, to my mind, has aged badly in the last fifty years; Fromm's legacy must above all be rescued from its taint by association with this creepy image. Saavedra complains that Fromm mistreated his Mexican disciples during his 23 years in the country, placing himself in the role of cultured European authority and preventing colleagues, students and patients alike from liberating themselves in the overarching shadow of his genius.<sup>65</sup> True and interesting as at least some of this may be, it could all be summed up in the phrase 'never meet your heroes'; one can continue to read Fromm today safe in the knowledge that one will never

---

<sup>63</sup> Leisinger, *Die Kunst der verantwortungsvollen Führung*, p. 101.

<sup>64</sup> Leisinger, *Die Kunst der verantwortungsvollen Führung*, p. 101.

<sup>65</sup> See Víctor Saavedra, *La promesa incumplida de Erich Fromm*, (México: Siglo XXI, 1994), pp. 165-172.

have to deal with him as a teacher or boss - or worse, prowling at the end of the couch.

Saavedra, meanwhile, betrays his godless view of human dialogue (and psychoanalysis) at the very end of his book:

The posture we have sought to defend is that the essence of the [psychoanalytic] process consists in removing obstacles so that the patient can walk her own path. The creativity required of the analyst, in this context, lies in finding ways to give the patient what she needs to do this and be herself. [...] Rather than creating meaning, the analyst rescues lost meaning. [...] Thus, when the analyst plays the role of listener rather than idol, sage and seducer who knows the way and has all the answers, the patient is empowered to develop her own capacities for knowledge and her own meanings, facing life as an adventure forged in daily experience [...] and with a licence to invent life and love for herself.<sup>66</sup>

This is postmodern relativism, not leadership: as we hope to illustrate in the coming chapters, Fromm and his humanist allies defend the view that there is no individual freedom, no human sociality or culture at all, without a lived connection to tradition. It is true that such tradition cannot by definition be imposed; it is the art of the great teacher or leader to transmit it, living, to new generations, instead of killing it by trying to bludgeon it by force (physical or 'spiritual', as Leisinger defines it) into resentful minds. When transmission *does* successfully occur, however, gratitude and a healthy sense of earned equality with one's teacher are the result, not the fear and inferiority complexes Saavedra alleges in Fromm's Mexican wake. No teacher, not even Erich Fromm, is equally popular among everyone, nor equally effective in her one-on-one work every day; this does not, however, invalidate the ongoing attempt to embody the best of the tradition one has received. By invoking Octavio Paz and his Sor Juana, Cortina is living up to just such intergenerational optimism.

---

<sup>66</sup> Saavedra, *La promesa incumplida de Erich Fromm*, p. 172.

#### 4. Hidaka and Shimizu: Feudal Foibles

*Octavio Paz once wrote that 'the characteristic feature of modernity is criticism'. This might seem very vague, but it is actually a very precise definition. The venture of being modern required the forsaking of old habits of ancestor worship and the end of reflexive deference to figures of authority. [...] It has long been a source of despair and exasperation to me and many other people that the intellectual archive created out of two world wars, the economic crises of the '20s and '30s, and the Holocaust is routinely prioritised over the insights of people exposed early and directly to fundamentally violent political and economic systems. A figure like Gandhi had a broader experience of the world, in three different continents - Asia, Africa, and Europe - than the Frankfurt School theorists when he wrote of the mass deceptions and hidden violence of Western democracies. And Hannah Arendt hadn't started writing about British concentration camps in South Africa when Jawaharlal Nehru declared fascism as the twin of Western imperialism.<sup>67</sup>*

Pankaj Mishra

Here we turn to a 1952 conversation on the Japanese translation of Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941). Cortina highlighted 'the psychology of fascism' as one of Fromm's clearest strengths, so let's see what two leading postwar Japanese sociologists, Hidaka Rokurō (1917-2018) and Shimizu Ikutarō (1907-1988), made of one of Fromm's most important books in an exchange for *Sekai* magazine titled '*Fashizumu no Shinri*' ('The Fascist Mentality'). Hidaka, it should be pointed out, was also the person who went to the trouble - a decade late, but better than never - of translating it.

Most early critique of fascism in Japan, we learn in the introduction, 'came from a [classical] Marxist point of view'; social-psychological work on the role of modern mass communication in shaping an irresistible fascist ideology, for example, was extremely late

---

<sup>67</sup> Pankaj Mishra, in Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, 'The Liberal Establishment Is A Stranger To Self-Examination', 23/11/2020 (accessed 1/12/2021).

to the party.<sup>68</sup> Hidaka's translation of *Escape from Freedom*, Shimizu contends, was hence an overdue but welcome addition to Japan's postwar reckoning with itself. Hidaka, meanwhile, regards *Escape from Freedom* as 'less interesting in a strictly scientific sense than as a broad critique of modern civilisation'<sup>69</sup>: post-Renaissance gains in religious freedom and general individual self-awareness, though unequivocally welcome improvements on the feudal shackles of the European Middle Ages, nevertheless caused disorientation, loneliness and general spiritual insecurity, not least, Fromm stresses, as modern capitalism took hold on Western nations after the Industrial Revolution. Fascism was one of two possible responses to this new predicament: the other, more demanding alternative was to 'forge a new conception of autonomous individual activity within new forms of human relationship'; the 'ideology of democracy' on its own, however, would struggle to resist the fascist threat.<sup>70</sup> Although Fromm speaks of the need for a new 'democratic socialism', what he really means, Shimizu argues, is a new 'theory of human nature' which accounts for the socioeconomic roots of human freedom.<sup>71</sup>

This social-psychological and sociological dimension was a welcome if controversial addition to American psychoanalysis, mired well into the 1930s in the excesses of Freud; the introduction of Fromm into postwar Japanese academic circles was naturally an even more delicate matter. Hidaka recognises in Fromm 'a certain degree of clear critique of capitalist society'; at the same time, however, Fromm's democratic socialist ideal will scarcely be realisable in a centrally planned economy.<sup>72</sup> Shimizu hence returns the discussion to Fromm's understanding of 'the relationship between love and work': modern human beings needs a 'fresh start' in this regard, and Fromm is hopeful that such a reboot remains possible.<sup>73</sup> Fromm's views on 'love, work, freedom and equality', Hidaka agrees, are radically different from, and

---

<sup>68</sup> Hidaka Rokurō and Shimizu Ikutarō, 'Fashizumu no Shinri: E. Furomu Jiyū kara no Tōsō' ('The Psychology of Fascism: Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*', *Sekai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten), No. 75 (March 1952), p. 123.

<sup>69</sup> Hidaka, 'Fashizumu no Shinri', p. 124.

<sup>70</sup> Hidaka, 'Fashizumu no Shinri', p. 124.

<sup>71</sup> Shimizu, 'Fashizumu no Shinri', pp. 124-125.

<sup>72</sup> Hidaka, 'Fashizumu no Shinri', p. 126.

<sup>73</sup> Shimizu, 'Fashizumu no Shinri', p. 126.

more optimistic than, those of a 'master of suspicion' like Freud<sup>74</sup>; nevertheless, Fromm's writings on ideology and social character are a reminder that such radical ideological changes as those imposed on Japan by defeat in 1945 will have a far-reaching impact on the individuals subjected to them; the moral-psychological evolution required for a thriving democracy is more than the sum total of raw individual free will. Shimizu in turn emphasises the deep feudal roots of 20th-century Japanese culture; in *Escape from Freedom* Fromm only obliquely addresses this lingering 'feudal psychological content'<sup>75</sup> in 20th-century Japanese hearts, for he is primarily interested, for obvious reasons, in modern *European* fascism, and the German variety in particular. Despite Japan's rapid modernisation after 1868, and for all the overlap with the European situation, the histories cannot, and should not, be bled together, least of all by someone who takes the social-psychological dimension of individual character development as seriously as Fromm does. Whereas Fromm understands Nazism in part as a reaction to the anomie of Weimar liberal life, Japanese fascism emerged more or less directly out of the Tokugawa feudal structures that had survived until 1868: post-Meiji reforms had been too swift to allow for a comparable period of individual freedom from a 'culture of obedience' such as might be said to describe freewheeling 1920s Berlin.<sup>76</sup> Whatever the wellsprings of Japanese fascism, individual feelings of isolation and insecurity proper to alienated modern subjects - the stuff of Western modernism from Kafka to Musil and Eliot - were not chief among them. Shimizu cites Maruyama Masao's 'brilliant' work on the sociology of Japanese fascism to illustrate that the totalitarian turn in Japanese politics in the 1930s was essentially an elite project which trickled down and won broad public support (i.e. *not* a populist uprising exploited by an opportunist leader).<sup>77</sup>

Once again here, Fromm is more interesting as a normative thinker (or 'prophetic analyst', as Cortina and Maccoby call him<sup>78</sup>) than as an empirical scientist; whether he can accurately *explain* the phenomenon of fascism in its various historical guises is less important than the global

---

<sup>74</sup> Hidaka, 'Fashizumu no Shinri', p. 126.

<sup>75</sup> Shimizu, 'Fashizumu no Shinri', p. 127.

<sup>76</sup> See Hidaka, 'Fashizumu no Shinri', p. 127.

<sup>77</sup> See Shimizu, 'Fashizumu no Shinri', p. 127.

<sup>78</sup> See Mauricio Cortina and Michael Maccoby (eds.), *A Prophetic Analyst: Erich Fromm's Contribution to Psychoanalysis*, (Jason Aronson, 1996).

horizon he intuits beyond it. As the Fromm epigraph to Cortina and Maccoby's co-edited 1996 volume *A Prophetic Analyst: Erich Fromm's Contribution to Psychoanalysis* puts it, 'The prophet [...] sees the possibilities of change and the direction the people must take, and he announces what he sees. [...] His] concern is the establishment of a society governed by love, justice, and truth.'<sup>79</sup> Not all societies, however, find themselves in the same place at the same time: Shimizu stresses that fascist Japan's problems went further than the 'attitude of love for power' which was widespread among alienated European axis populations (and which Fromm diagnosed with his work on the authoritarian character). The deeper 'irrationalism'<sup>80</sup> of the 'feudal' Japanese mindset manifested itself, for example, in the fact that Emperor Hirohito issued his highly ambiguous *Humanity Declaration* as late as 1 January, 1946, a document in which, moreover, he only partially admitted to his ordinary mammalian status. Despite Hirohito's attempt to laud the Meiji Restoration of 1868 as a victory for the modern forces of 'science and democracy' against a backdrop of enduring Japanese exceptionalism (and pride in the face of humiliating defeat), the postwar Japanese Constitution in fact echoed 'pre-modern' 18th-century developments; at the very least, by European standards, postwar Japan found itself addressing pre-modern, modern and post-modern problems all at the same time, a more complicated spiritual situation than any straightforward European 'dialectic of Enlightenment' could hope to capture (Fromm's former Frankfurt School colleagues Adorno and Horkheimer did not have Shinto concepts like *akitsumikami* and *arahitogami* in mind at the end of the war as Hirohito did when he sought to explain his continuing genetic ties to the Age of the Gods in such a way as to avoid angering Japan's American occupiers). Modern Japanese citizens, in short, had not embarked on an 'escape from freedom' as Fromm's Nazi Germans (and alienated Western modernist subjects in general) had; they had never quite known it in the same Weimar way.

That Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* was not a perfect match for Japan's circumstances, however, did not mean that Frommian 'prophecy' was completely irrelevant to it. Hidaka paraphrases Fromm, for instance, on the ambiguous nature of modern labour unions everywhere: on the one hand, these organisations 'give self-confidence

---

<sup>79</sup> See Cortina and Maccoby (eds.), *A Prophetic Analyst*, p. 5.

<sup>80</sup> Shimizu, '*Fashizumu no Shinri*', p. 129.

to individuals harmed by the capitalist economy'; on the other hand, the sheer size and influence of union structures threatens to undermine 'individual creativity and spontaneous autonomy', thereby defeating the purpose of unions in the first place.<sup>81</sup> Shimizu, meanwhile, laments the lack of a 'spirit of service' among Japanese social and human scientists<sup>82</sup>: instead of basking in status and obscure 'respect' from bewildered Japanese taxpayers, such experts would do better to follow Fromm's example and engage the public directly instead of hiding behind their academic privileges and calling for others to step forward into the public sphere. Hidaka goes so far as to describe an 'extreme lack of love'<sup>83</sup> for ordinary people among Japanese academics, and welcomes Fromm's introduction of the word 'love' into debates on authoritarianism and modernity (*The Art of Loving* will appear in print just a few years after this article).

Fromm stops short of definitively answering the question of the ultimate relationship between capitalism and democracy; Shimizu is in any case concerned by an enduring Japanese 'psychology of waiting for orders', and wonders out loud whether this is compatible with modern democracy and the 'promise of freedom' it implies.<sup>84</sup> At least Shimizu himself is now 'embarrassed to *give* orders', as if such behaviour is always 'a contravention of the democratic principle'.<sup>85</sup> Hidaka remains concerned by the danger of tyrannical majorities<sup>86</sup>; the implicit consensus between the two would seem to be that Fromm offers a fresh way of thinking about freedom and democracy that, for all its social-psychological and sociological insight, ultimately rests on the individual's relationship with herself, her world and her work. Meiji 'democracy' may have been 'pre-modern', and may have culminated in fascism just as hyper-modern Weimar democracy did, but for all the differences between the two countries and their respective fascisms, the postwar way forward in both Japan and Germany, as elsewhere in a globalising world, would depend on the individual embrace - or re-embrace, as the case may be - of a freedom associated with the brave autonomy of the

---

<sup>81</sup> Hidaka, '*Fashizumu no Shinri*', p. 130.

<sup>82</sup> Shimizu, '*Fashizumu no Shinri*', p. 130.

<sup>83</sup> Hidaka, '*Fashizumu no Shinri*', p. 131.

<sup>84</sup> Shimizu, '*Fashizumu no Shinri*', pp. 131-132.

<sup>85</sup> Shimizu, '*Fashizumu no Shinri*', p. 132.

<sup>86</sup> Hidaka, '*Fashizumu no Shinri*', p. 132.

idealised modern individual, a heroic or 'prophetic' figure able to navigate a path between the Scylla of the capitalist 'marketing mentality' and the Charybdis of fascist security blankets.

## 5. Lechhab: Socrates in Casablanca

*The space that literature is busy losing must be reconquered, but that will require a resurgence of the humility which is proper to humanism at its best. Such humanism is not a glorification of a being more intelligent than her ape cousins, but of people who know that they need the texts of the past to understand the world and themselves.<sup>87</sup>*

Alain Finkielkraut

In '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*', Hamid Lechhab sets himself the task - artificial but interesting - of deciding how much Fromm's concept of 'dialogue' has to do with the famous Socratic version enshrined in the *Dialogues* of Plato. In any case, if Fromm had lived long enough to see the rise of 'clash of civilisations' rhetoric in the 1990s, he would have opposed it:

In both his personal relationships and his psychoanalytic profession, Fromm was a man of dialogue. I would say that he belonged to the Socratic and Platonic philosophical tradition. Dialogue and a sense of empathy are both means of mutual knowledge among human beings. Fromm, moreover, sought to finish the social and political job which the 18th-century pioneers of Enlightenment had started, thereby paving the way for a deeper understanding of the world by means of reason - and enabling knowledge of self and others without any loss of emotional and aesthetic faculties. Fromm warned of the dangers of psychosocial isolation in industrial societies; he stressed the difficulty of building relationships [under modern conditions]. We can deduce from all this that Fromm would have been a million miles from advocating any escalation of current 'clash of civilizations' talk.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Alain Finkielkraut, 'Alain Finkielkraut dans Punchline le 9 novembre 2021', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8gvB2m5SF8> (accessed 24/11/2021).

<sup>88</sup> Hamid Lechhab, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*', in H. Lechhab (ed.), *Hiwar ath-Thaqafāt wan-Naz'a al-Insaniya*, (Casablanca: Top Edition, 2007), p. 94. This is my own retranslation of Lechhab's Arabic translation of his original English email to Rainer Funk.

Lechhab begins by paraphrasing Fromm's words in Düsseldorf in September 1961: in order to tackle the theme of 'modern man and his future', it would be necessary to include all people living in the 20th Century, or in other words 'Westerners cheek by jowl with Asians and Africans'.<sup>89</sup> Fromm's broadbrush history of civilisation is nevertheless casually Eurocentric: an amorphous evolutionary prehistory of 'idol worship' gradually gives way, after about 1500BC, to the emergence of *al-diyānāt al-insāniya* or 'humanistic religions' across Eurasia (Jaspers' 'Axial turn', roughly speaking), before Christianity takes root in the Roman Empire and cross-fertilises with Greco-Roman philosophy (which allowed a 'rediscovery of the self' after the totalitarian Dark Ages<sup>90</sup>) to give birth, via the Renaissance, to 'modern society'.<sup>91</sup> Lechhab will rightly stress Arab contributions to this march of civilisation, most notably through translations in Baghdad and the contribution of 12-century Andalusians like Averroes, but the *result* for Fromm is clear: the Renaissance unleashed a burst of unprecedented utopian thinking about the possibility of realising the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, an optimism which raged down through the Enlightenment, more or less unbroken, until 1914: 'The messianic vision of the good society, of the human[e] society, appeared to come to fruition in the 19th Century. Until the First World War, European humanity was ruled by its belief in the fulfilment of these hopes and ideas.'<sup>92</sup> Lechhab's wording here is even more telling than Fromm's original:

Fromm's Renaissance man had developed an awareness of his own power; he subsequently began to liberate himself from the chains of nature and attempt dominion over her. By the 19th Century it seemed as if this process [of dominion] was more or less complete, such that wars could finally be eliminated and material surpluses [for all] safely stored.<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> Lechhab, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*, p. 95.

<sup>90</sup> See Lechhab, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*, p. 97.

<sup>91</sup> Lechhab, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>92</sup> Fromm, in Lechhab, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*, p. 97.

<sup>93</sup> Lechhab, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*, p. 97.

Despite premature European illusions of self-generated surplus (a wealth in fact built less on Western innovation than ruthless colonial exploitation of non-Westerners), Fromm's 'modernity' essentially starts with the exponential economic growth made possible by the Industrial Revolution; Fromm's work only really makes sense, Lechhab argues, in a world where the temptations of material excess are real for a broad mass of people:

We must remember the core values of Fromm's humanism: the necessity of the quest for truth, without which there is no life worthy of the name; and the demand for autonomy, for an ability to live this freedom and to exercise the critical spirit that such freedom implies. These are both inextricably tied to the state of our mental health. For Fromm, contemporary Western society threatens these values by tempting us to make compromises for the sake of wealth acquisition, thereby making us alienated slaves to consumption, often dependent on the power of a single [leader or boss] to offer us illusory security in return [for our loyalty].<sup>94</sup>

Whereas medieval serfdom offered only the prospect of physical death for disobedience, Fromm's post-industrial modernity adds the possibility of mass spiritual suicide to the menu, even as the material conditions for the productive 'self-realisation' of ordinary citizens can, in principle, be more and more easily met with every passing year of economic growth. Fromm's preface to *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (1960) lays out the stakes:

There is no better example that can be cited for men who are deaf to the question posed by existence than we ourselves, living in the twentieth century. We try to evade the question by concern with property, prestige, power, production, fun, and, ultimately, by trying to forget that we - that I - exist. [...] If he, the whole man, is deaf to the question of existence, if he does not have an answer to it, he is marking time, and he lives and dies like one of the million things he produces.<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> Lechhab, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*, p. 98.

<sup>95</sup> See Erich Fromm, in Erich Fromm, D.T. Suzuki and Richard de Martino, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, (Harper & Brothers, 1960).

Whatever we wish to make of Fromm's brief lay history of humankind, the modern 'surplus' problem he traces to the Industrial Revolution has gone global since his death in 1980: middle-class populations are growing everywhere, even and especially in societies which may not have passed through the unique cultural filter of post-Renaissance European 'individualism' and 'utopianism'. The West itself, meanwhile, had its optimism crushed - permanently, some argue - by two world wars. This rapid and uneven cultural ferment of globalisation - accelerated exponentially by our own Internet revolution - produces a chaotic contemporary scene in which individuals struggle as never before for their cultural bearings, a state of affairs to which no cultural historian, professional or amateur, could hope to do justice. Lechhab does not seriously try: after pausing briefly to mention the financialisation of our economies ('beyond the purview of any global justice'), the rise of religious extremism and the threat posed by nuclear proliferation<sup>96</sup>, he turns his attention to Fromm's posthumous *The Art of Listening* (1994):

If it is possible to weave, as Fromm did, a rough-and-ready narrative of the adventure of Western man from ancient Greece to our own time, why should it not be possible to defend, as I will seek to do, the idea that Fromm carried a torch of humanistic wisdom from Socrates and Greek philosophy [into post-industrial modernity]? When I reread *The Art of Listening*, published in 1994 with an introduction from Rainer Funk, I realised that my intuition [of a meaningful connection] had not been misguided.<sup>97</sup>

The common thread is the primacy of critical self-knowledge over unconscious tribal habit:

'What is the aim of psychoanalysis? Now that's a very simple question, and I think there's a simple answer. To know oneself. Now this 'to know oneself' is a very old human need; from the Greeks to the Middle Ages to modern times you find the idea that knowing oneself is the basis of knowledge of the world, or as

---

<sup>96</sup> Lechhab, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*', pp. 98-99.

<sup>97</sup> Lechhab, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*', p. 99.

Meister Eckhart expressed it in a very drastic form: 'The only way to know God is to know oneself.'<sup>98</sup>

We might wish to add that such an aspiration, far from being 'old' or automatic, is in fact modern *par excellence* - much less exclusively Western than Fromm eurocentrically suggests, but utterly exceptional to the totalitarian rule of primate societies viewed against the long and brutal backdrop of evolutionary time.<sup>99</sup>

A 'hidden dual need', Lechhab argues, runs through Socrates to Fromm: 'to acquire spiritual knowledge through transformation via contact with other spirits'; and 'to embody justice and truth in one's own spirit':

For Socrates, dialogue allows us to reach a conscious awareness of spirit, and for Fromm, it opens the way to the unconscious, allowing for full self-knowledge beyond rationality and philosophical method. If Socrates offers a path towards the birth of [conscious] spirit, doesn't Fromm provide, after Freud, a path into the unconscious?<sup>100</sup>

Spiritual growth via dialogue requires constant oscillation between contact with others and critical reflection inside oneself; Fromm's preferred routine involved reading and writing in the morning and working with people in the afternoon.<sup>101</sup> The modern psychotherapeutic context which interested Fromm and mid-century existential humanist psychologists like Viktor Frankl is revealed to be a locus of something much more than an imparting of easily swallowable 'medical' wisdom from doctor to patient; the 'art of listening' is in fact the art of *mutual* transformation:

For therapy, the important thing is that the patient can mobilise his or her own sense of responsibility and activity. I think a good

---

<sup>98</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Art of Listening*, (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 45.

<sup>99</sup> Even David Graeber's brave work on Madagascan proto-democracy and general rekindled humanist optimism in *The Dawn of Everything* (2021) seeks to find needles of autonomous human cooperation in the haystack of oppression which might broadly be said to characterise the history of our species.

<sup>100</sup> Lechhab, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*', pp. 100-101.

<sup>101</sup> See Lechhab, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*', p. 102.

deal of what goes on under analysis today is based on an assumption which many patients have: that this is a method in which one gets happy without taking risks, without suffering, without being active, without making decisions. This doesn't happen in life and it doesn't happen in analysis.<sup>102</sup>

This naturally implies an equal and opposite responsibility on the part of the analyst to open herself to the possibility of transformation via contact with the 'patient': for all the responsibility that Plato's Allegory of the Cave places on the shoulders of those who have seen the light, expert knowledge does not imply an existential hierarchy or freedom from vulnerability. The Dialogues of Plato may be read as borderline arrogant displays of argumentative genius by Socrates, but something in the very fact of his dialogical engagement suggests faith in his equality of condition with his enchained interlocutor: he exposes himself to conversation without knowing what the exact result will be, trusting only that mutual spiritual edification will take place. The modern injunction to 'know thyself' is paradoxically embodied by Socrates, one of the precursors of this modernity, in his use of irony, in his reluctance to teach any specific doctrine, and in his famous insistence on 'knowing only that he doesn't know'; this creates a safe space for his dialogue partners, and indeed for the reader of Plato's *Dialogues*, to endure the humiliation of a Socratic *reductio ad absurdum* without feeling wounded in their identity, and to embark on further critical journeys of their own at a safe distance from the wounding gaze of others. Just as Socrates' mother gave physical birth to him, so too did he seek, in his profession, to throw his conversation partners into this free world of ideas, not by professing any fundamental superiority, but merely by embodying such freedom from fear and shame in his own argumentative style.<sup>103</sup> The modern Frommian psychoanalyst, Lechhab argues, does something similar by adopting a posture such that, for all her years of study, she can know nothing directly about the problems of the 'patient': at best, she can help to shine a torch on their common ignorance.<sup>104</sup> Only on this basis of fundamental equality, in other words, might specific helpful conversations take place: 'The opposite of Freud, Fromm did not

---

<sup>102</sup> Fromm, *The Art of Listening*, p. 74.

<sup>103</sup> See Lechhab, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrāf*', pp. 104-105. He cites Pierre Hadot's *Éloge de Socrate* (Paris: Allia, 1998) extensively here.

<sup>104</sup> See Lechhab, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrāf*', pp. 105-106.

analyse; he may have sat behind his patients, but ultimately he was face to face with them in dialogical relationality.<sup>105</sup> Among other things, this meant a Socratic willingness to ‘reverse roles’ and accept the lion’s share of responsibility for a conversation where one’s partner grows uncomfortable; as Fromm succinctly puts it in *The Art of Listening*, ‘there is no better analysis for analysts than analysing other people.’<sup>106</sup> Just as partners to a Socratic dialogue come to occupy the same space in a world of floating and unthreatening rationality, so too does the human ability to experience what others experience, albeit through the dark glass of empathy, allow for the construction of a shared reality; a professional psychoanalytic setting is simply where one party feels a sharp (if largely unconscious) emergency-room need for such shared construction. A pub or bar offers similar medicine over the counter, while philosophy in the Socratic tradition prescribes it: ‘The work of Socrates is not in any sense an individual construction, but rather an awakening of conscience and a reaching of an existential level that is only possible in the relationship between one human being and another.’<sup>107</sup> Indeed, for both Socrates and Fromm, the enhanced ‘self-knowledge’ that arises from this dialogical experience is only the beginning: the end goal is actually to ‘live according to one’s own ideas without unduly succumbing to the stress of social pressure [not to do so].’<sup>108</sup>

Lechhab offers a highbrow and a lowbrow version of the conscience uniting Socrates and Fromm: it may be loftily described as ‘a harmonisation of thought and existence’ on the one hand or as ‘an attempt to embody in one’s private life the ideas one defends [in public]’<sup>109</sup> on the other. Socrates was keen to illustrate ‘the limits of language’; there is no way to penetrate the meaning of justice ‘without living it oneself’.<sup>110</sup> Fromm, meanwhile, regarded psychoanalysis as more than treatment of psychopathology, and more broadly as ‘a path to decency’: instead of contenting itself with bringing below-averagely happy people up to the current median level, psychoanalysis should

---

<sup>105</sup> Lechhab, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 106.

<sup>106</sup> Fromm, *The Art of Listening*, p. 108.

<sup>107</sup> Lechhab, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 108. This is my retranslation of Lechhab’s Arabic translation of Hadot.

<sup>108</sup> Lechhab, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, pp. 108-109.

<sup>109</sup> Lechhab, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 109.

<sup>110</sup> See Lechhab via Hadot, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 110.

understand that it has ‘a deeper spiritual function’ common to religions around the world: this is, parodying Marx, to act as ‘the opium of self-discernment, the opium of reason.’<sup>111</sup> This critical attitude naturally extends, however, to the society as a whole in which one finds oneself, and without which no ‘self-discernment’ would be possible<sup>112</sup>:

Everything depends on the analyst’s attitude towards society. Most analysts take the bourgeois view that society is basically healthy, and that the individual who adapts to it should also be considered as such. To say that someone is ‘well adapted’, however, means only that she is as mad as the mean! As a socialist and an all-round critical spirit, I rather take the view that we live in an inhumane, irrational and unsound society.<sup>113</sup>

Though a degree of political pluralism among contemporary Frommians may naturally be observed, it is clear that Fromm himself understood his humanist project as fundamentally left-of-centre (hence the difficulty, discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, of ‘adapting’ Fromm for the right-wing world of management consultancy). The goal of ‘ethical discourse’, Lechhab argues, is to establish ‘the conditions which are conducive to the healthy development of man’<sup>114</sup>; in no sane culture has money ever been an end in itself. For all that Fromm is, and ought to be, cautious about wishing away the exponential economic growth enjoyed by 19th-century Europe (an unprecedented bounty into which he was born in the bourgeois capital Frankfurt in 1900), he still wishes to cling to an older ‘medieval’ ideal in which money is fundamentally a means for humanistic self-education and self-realisation:

In the old days, a Jewish man of letters was not a rabbi as we understand the profession today, but a figure of towering erudition who sometimes made his living by maintaining a stall, or as Spinoza did by working as an optician who occasionally

---

<sup>111</sup> See Lechhab via Fromm, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 110. Once again I am translating back from Lechhab’s Arabic here.

<sup>112</sup> See also Lechhab, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 112.

<sup>113</sup> See Lechhab via Fromm, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 110. In this case the Moroccan Lechhab is citing Fromm’s *Revoir Freud* (edited by Gerard D. Khoury) in his footnotes (and in French rather than Arabic). This is my own English retranslation.

<sup>114</sup> Lechhab, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 111.

performed rabbinical services for a small fee. But none of this was ever his main activity: he continued all the while to read and to teach. This tradition has been very important to me. I remember very clearly how strange I found it as a child that some people could devote the lion's share of their lives to making money. [...] In this sense I had not yet joined the modern world.<sup>115</sup>

Lechhab quotes a corresponding passage from Plato's *Apology* in order to further his argument for affinity between Fromm and Socrates: 'I do not pay much attention to the things that concern most people, namely money matters, the management of assets, the occupation of strategic state posts, the success of my rhetoric in winning over public opinion to my advantage, lawsuits, alliances, or political faction-building.'<sup>116</sup> Instead, the Socratic vocation can be understood as similar to Fromm's psychoanalytic one, namely as an 'attempt to convince you to pay less attention to the accumulation of property than to the essence of becoming a better and more reasonable person.'<sup>117</sup> The fundamental question how much baseline wealth is required for such a humanistic life orientation is left unanswered; Fromm's much-maligned 'sick and twisted' 20th Century was naturally the first in human history to provide, or begin to provide, a *per capita* income in which every person in a given country might learn to read (the Platonic and Aristotelian penchant for slavery, or at least their assumption of background slavery, can scarcely go uncommented in our own time; Plato's Academy is in any case unimaginable without it, even as the humanistic rationality it unleashed culminated in the abolition of slavery some twenty-something centuries later once the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution had begun to generate sufficient wealth to make such abolition imaginable).

The challenge for Frommians is therefore how to overcome the Enlightenment fetish for 'instrumental rationality' - a degradation of the original Socratic (and Confucian) ideal - without dismantling the very industrial architecture that an unleashed thirst for profit was able to build (with the help of a colonisation not far removed from ancient slavery). Such exponential economic growth allows us to imagine, for the first time, the possibility of a universal humanistic education for all people in

---

<sup>115</sup> See Lechhab via Fromm, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*', p. 111.

<sup>116</sup> See Lechhab via Hadot, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*', p. 112.

<sup>117</sup> See Lechhab via Hadot, '*Irik Frum Bā'ith Suqrā'*', p. 112.

all countries; it should be possible, in other words, to retool the unintended consequences of the pathological Protestant work ethic for a humane 21st-century globalisation. So far, however, ‘we have failed to affirm [a proper notion] of individual freedom’ and to ‘find examples which allow us to overcome our fear and uncertainty in the face of the [modern] world.’<sup>118</sup> As long as one *feels* that one is underpaid or underresourced, in other words, one cannot really begin to be free; it is only to the extent that one has achieved *subjective financial independence* that one can relax and enjoy the bounties of the spirit.<sup>119</sup> This dialogical disposition of happy-hour ‘openness to the other’ is incompatible with ‘necrophilic’ economic and cultural nationalism<sup>120</sup>; one need not accept Fromm’s outdated dichotomy - biophilic good, necrophilic bad - to understand his sustained critique, for example, of extractive American foreign policy and other modern modes of imperialism: ‘Fromm repeatedly insisted in his writings on the fundamental oneness of humanity,’ Lechhab writes, before offering us the relevant words of the master himself: ‘I believe that equality is felt when, completely discovering oneself, one recognises that one is equal to others and identifies with them. Every individual bears humanity inside himself; “the human condition” is unique and equal for all [people], in spite of inevitable differences in intelligence, talent, height, colour etc.’<sup>121</sup>

Lechhab, however, is sensitive to the cultural specificity of this humanism: ‘Fromm had confidence in the individual human being, in her ability for critical thought and capacity for resistance [to conformist pressure]. This has been the outstanding feature of Western [public

---

<sup>118</sup> See Lechhab via Fromm, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 112.

<sup>119</sup> Fromm’s view of the psychoanalytic vocation should also be understood in these terms: the analyst has a right to earn enough for financial independence, but no more. In his review of *Revoir Freud*, Mounir Chamoun cites Fromm’s critique of greedy psychanalysts:

Fromm calls out certain psychanalytic colleagues for charging exorbitant prices to their clients. There is always some convenient justification. In response to a question on the role of money in patient-client relationships, Fromm replied: ‘It’s a swindle, pure and simple! The rationalisations are absurd. They argue that the patient must be willing to sacrifice something big, otherwise the analysis won’t work. A rich man will never get to paradise; with this attitude, even if you make him pay 200 dollars an hour, it won’t be enough. What actually matters is the depth and quality of the patient, not the amount she pays you.’ (Mounir Chamoun, ‘*Revoir Freud d’Erich Fromm et Gérard D. Khoury*’, *L’Orient Le Jour*, 27/11/2000, p. 6)

<sup>120</sup> See Lechhab, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 114.

<sup>121</sup> Lechhab, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 115. Here he cites Fromm’s *On Being Human*, p. 103.

intellectuals] from Socrates to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and [via Fromm] right down to our time.’<sup>122</sup> Lechhab laments the relative lack of humanist exceptionalism in the Arab world, though he argues that the root of the problem is ‘anthropological’ rather than religious or political: an authoritarian conformism still predominates in 21st-century Arab education and public life.<sup>123</sup> Fromm and Socrates, meanwhile, offer a path to human unity precisely in their ability to embody their own free individual selves; whereas an Arab world mired in traditionalism looks destined to ‘remain at the margins of modernity, cut off from responsibility for the future of the world as a whole’<sup>124</sup>, Fromm’s furthering of the Socratic legacy in a post-Freudian and post-Darwinian world offers a vision of a new human polity: ‘Fromm may be considered a descendant of Greek philosophy and a legitimate heir and furtherer of the Socratic tradition because he was able to maintain an insistence [in modern times] on the simultaneous necessity of self-knowledge and decency.’<sup>125</sup> This ‘new humanism’, rooted in individual freedom and equality and hostile to an increasingly unnecessary ‘establishment greed’, is ‘the condition for a united world’.<sup>126</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> Lechhab, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 115.

<sup>123</sup> See Lechhab, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, pp. 115-116.

<sup>124</sup> Lechhab, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 116.

<sup>125</sup> Lechhab, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 117.

<sup>126</sup> Lechhab via Fromm, ‘*Irik Frum Bā’ith Suqrā’*’, p. 117.

## 6. Gurevich: Mother History

*Certain kinds of truth can only be expressed using certain kinds of language. What we call ‘poetic truth’ is an example of this. [...] Taking two essentially different things and yoking them together by a common conceit is essentially nonsensical — the sea is not ‘wine-dark’, and the dawn is not ‘rosy-fingered’ — but its resonance is unquestionable. [...] Literature thus becomes the space where the game of language can be played at its highest and most explosive level, where meaning is finessed and caressed, where the use of words is the most open and unexpected. This, at least, is true of all literature that doesn’t approach language as mere utility (most books don’t meet this standard). [...] Wittgenstein] writes like a poet trapped inside a philosopher, plagued by the awful knowledge that, while philosophy can describe the world, fiction can live it, by showing us how language is intrinsic to perception and how we rig up worlds with our words. He is, in many ways, the most literary of modern thinkers. [...] Literature is not just a social form; it is ‘a form of life’, not just communication between minds but the communion of minds. It is the closest we can ever come to knowing what the lion’s life is like. That is, if we’re still curious enough to ask.<sup>127</sup>*

Jared Marcel Pollen

Pavel Gurevich (1933-2018), the Russian translator of Fromm’s *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), seeks to locate the book (and Fromm’s wider oeuvre) between the poles of philosophy and empirical science, arguing that Fromm was really a ‘philosopher’ who embellished his arguments with empirical anecdotes rather than the other way round. Finding himself in an epoch where the pessimistic Xunzian view of human nature enjoyed a virtual ‘monopoly’ over its age-old Mencian rival, Fromm went into bat for philosophical optimism,

---

<sup>127</sup> Jared Marcel Pollen, ‘The Way Out of the Fly-Bottle: Wittgenstein’s “Tractatus” at 100’, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-way-out-of-the-fly-bottle-wittgensteins-tractatus-at-100/>, 7/11/2021 (accessed 23/11/2021).

enlisting empirical sources for rhetorical purposes but, Gurevich argues, without strictly needing them: 'The main idea of Fromm's book, despite its empirical wealth, remains a purely philosophical one.'<sup>128</sup> If Fromm digs into the biographies of Hitler and Stalin, for example, it is primarily to illustrate Albert Schweitzer's (strictly 'philosophical') concept of 'biophilia' via case studies of its 'necrophilic' opposite.<sup>129</sup> Tracing Fromm's interest in the problem of evil back to *Escape from Freedom*, Gurevich argues that Fromm seeks to 'formulate a purely secular conception of evil' without recourse to the 'metaphysical abstractions' of an Augustine or Leibniz: destructiveness for Fromm is 'a last, desperate [response] of the individual to the collapse of the ordinary human conditions of existence,' Gurevich argues, a reaction to the 'powerlessness and isolation' of modern life.<sup>130</sup> If it is doubtful that pre-modern societies offered Fromm's humanist idyll of autonomous reading, writing and dialoguing to many for long, it is equally true that certain facts about modern life have made the promised land of a global republic of letters harder, not easier, to reach, and that, as Gurevich dryly puts it in Moscow in 1994, 'we now have every reason to say that human beings are far from saintly.'<sup>131</sup>

Fromm's view of human destructiveness naturally evolved over the decades; whereas *Escape from Freedom* portrays destructive tendencies as 'the natural outcome of unlived life', *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Gurevich argues, offers a seemingly different view: 'There is no need for us to outgrow our animal history. We are in no way destructive by nature. The destructiveness which now clings to us is an acquired trait. History itself has seduced us, spawning a lust for pogroms and other disasters.'<sup>132</sup> These really amount, however, to the same humanistic challenge: Fromm wishes to show, like many 'philosophers' before him, 'that the sources of decency, just like those of destructiveness, are to be found in human freedom.'<sup>133</sup> Gurevich interestingly quotes Varlam Shalamov here, reminding us that the great

---

<sup>128</sup> Pavel Gurevich, 'Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna', in Erich Fromm, *Anatomiya Chelovecheskoy Destruktivnosti*, (Moscow: Republika, 1994), pp. 3-4.

<sup>129</sup> Gurevich, 'Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna', p. 4.

<sup>130</sup> Gurevich, 'Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna', p. 5.

<sup>131</sup> Gurevich, 'Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna', p. 5.

<sup>132</sup> Gurevich, 'Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna', p. 6.

<sup>133</sup> Gurevich, 'Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna', p. 6.

narrator of Stalin's gulags 'never felt so uninhibited as when he was in prison'<sup>134</sup> (as distinct from the labour camp itself, which was hellish slavery<sup>135</sup>). Like Shalamov, in other words, Fromm identifies spiritual freedom with a certain absence of externally imposed *work* (against a backdrop of minimal material security); a safe prison which provides books, meals and exercise, and makes no particular labour demands on its prisoners, may hence provide a better environment for human spiritual development than an exploitative modern-day office or job-site.

Gurevich enlists Nietzsche and Kierkegaard as 19th-century philosophical pioneers in Fromm's 20th-century quest to understand the active abdication of the responsibilities of freedom among modern populations: 'The human reluctance to embrace freedom is undoubtedly one of the more shocking discoveries in [19th-century Western] philosophical thought. It seems as if freedom is an acquired taste, enjoyed only by the most refined palates.'<sup>136</sup> Fromm himself cites Nietzsche in the following context (one year after the publication of *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*):

Few can escape the influence of an axiom widely inculcated from our childhoods, namely that human beings are lazy by nature. This axiom is not some isolated exception, but rather part of a wider campaign to persuade us that human nature is bad, and that the power of Church and/or State will be needed to keep all the evil at bay, even if such containment can only ever be achieved with limited success. If one accepts the axiom that human beings are lazy, greedy and destructive by nature, then they will need bosses - holy and earthly - to prevent them from indulging their penchants [for vice].

Seen historically, however, it would be truer to turn the tables: if certain institutions and leaders want to control people, their most efficient ideological weapon will be to convince them that they cannot trust themselves to follow their own compass of desires and instincts because it is guided by the devil. No one understood this better than Nietzsche: if you can succeed in lodging a permanent sense of sin and guilt in people, they will be incapable of being free, of being themselves, because they will

---

<sup>134</sup> Gurevich, 'Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna', p. 6.

<sup>135</sup> Chapter 2 of my *Four Humanisms In One Day* (2021) is devoted to Shalamov's *Artist Polaty*.

<sup>136</sup> Gurevich, 'Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna', p. 7.

feel that their very selves are corrupted, and that free expression of these selves would hence be unauthorised. The individual may react to this radical accusation [of evil] with abject submission or with a violent aggression that only confirms the hypothesis, but in either event she will not be free, and will not be the master of her own life; she will not be able to be herself.<sup>137</sup>

Gurevich stresses that the social-psychological dimension of psychoanalysis which so interests Fromm can only be explored on the basis of a deep understanding of cultural history which philosophy and literature alone can provide. Fromm hence offers a challenge to social science in general, and to post-Soviet social science in particular: '[Fromm] does not see a detached, asocial individual before him, as Freud largely did, but a human being embedded in a real social-historical context. [...] Fromm the philosopher shows how the unrepeatable existential storehouse of each individual human being is carved into a specific social background landscape.'<sup>138</sup> The problem of individual destructiveness appears in this context as 'historical or prehistorical'<sup>139</sup> rather than philogenetic: in other words, the 'prophetic' philosopher or artist seeks to imagine a human future which may never have existed in the past, but in which the 'freedom' enjoyed only by spiritual aristocrats in our time might be enjoyed by all. The empirical or 'scientific' work serves only as proof of humanistic concept, or as proof of the 'conditions of possibility' of the concept.

Gurevich distinguishes Fromm's humanism from 'anthropocentric' existentialisms which offer the illusion of total freedom from the social-historical enabling constraints of our concrete existences.<sup>140</sup> Any attempt to define human nature as an ahistorical essence 'risks unleashing a new despotism'; Gurevich dutifully cites Heidegger's 1946 *Letter on Humanism* to warn us against the overembrace of any particular -isms in this sphere (though this caution surely applies just as well to the murky meanderings of Heidegger himself).<sup>141</sup> Even a seemingly 'authoritarian'

---

<sup>137</sup> Erich Fromm, '*L'homme est-il paresseux par nature?*' ('Are Human Beings Lazy By Nature?'), trans. Suzanne Kadar and Judith Dupont, in *Le Coq Héron*, no. 183, December 2005 (1974), p. 76. Yet again, this is my playful retranslation from the French, not the original.

<sup>138</sup> Gurevich, '*Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna*', p. 8.

<sup>139</sup> Gurevich, '*Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna*', p. 8.

<sup>140</sup> See Gurevich, '*Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna*', p. 9.

<sup>141</sup> See Gurevich, '*Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna*', p. 9.

and 'destructive' character like Heidegger<sup>142</sup>, however, must be understood in context: 'When judging an individual human being, it is impossible not to take a critical view of the society in which she lives,'<sup>143</sup> Gurevich concludes on Fromm's behalf. This requires much more, however, than the binary and pseudoscientific psychologising categorisations (biophilic/necrophilic, destructive/productive etc.) for which Fromm the bestselling author is chiefly known, and in which he at times overindulged. Such epithets serve at best as signposts rather than loadbearers of meaning; or rather, like Viktor Frankl (with whom deep comparisons are warranted), Fromm will end up being better remembered as a sensitive chronicler of his turbulent age than as a bland theoriser of it.<sup>144</sup>

Gurevich defines the humanistic canon to which Fromm contributed in the following terms: 'Fromm tried to discuss the plight of the human being in the [specific] context of a centuries-old [Renaissance] humanism in its encounter with the discoveries of Freud'<sup>145</sup> and amid the trauma of two world wars of unprecedented destruction. As Frankl and Shalamov discovered firsthand, Fromm also came to learn that 'the syndrome of necrophilia was widespread among prisoners of concentration camps', and like Milan Kundera, he recognised that 20th-century mass media promoted dangerous kitsch to large numbers of people.<sup>146</sup> The lasting value of Fromm's work, however, lies not in its restatement of now commonplace historical wisdom or in its popularisation of social-scientific discoveries made by others, but rather in its insistence on the importance of history and the stories of the ancestors for human self-understanding:

---

<sup>142</sup> Quite apart from the famous antisemitism and Nazi affiliations, the temperature of Heidegger's 'destructiveness' towards foreign cultures can be taken from this *Black Notebooks* excerpt: 'The bourgeois-Christian form of English "bolshevism" is the most dangerous. Without its destruction, the modern era will remain intact. [...] What, other than engineering and metaphysically paving the way for socialism, other than commonplace thinking and tastelessness, has England contributed in terms of "culture"?''

<sup>143</sup> Gurevich, 'Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna', p. 9.

<sup>144</sup> See pp. 196-212 of my *Peking Eulogy* for a discussion of Frankl's *Ein Psycholog erlebt das Konzentrationslager*.

<sup>145</sup> Gurevich, 'Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna', p. 11.

<sup>146</sup> See Gurevich, 'Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna', p. 14. See pp. 456-457 of *Peking Eulogy* for my own treatment of Kundera's views on kitsch.

Fromm the philosopher rightly stresses that to describe the behaviour of the most famous 20th-century fanatics, those responsible for the deaths of millions of human beings, as merely the work of 'demons' is an extremely unproductive business. Such treatment adds nothing to our understanding of evil in human history.

Fromm's work [...] forces us to engage with history critically, and with the utmost attention to detail.<sup>147</sup>

---

<sup>147</sup> Gurevich, 'Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna', p. 14.

## 7. Cotta: Biophilia Redux

*T.S. Eliot [...] defined the man of letters as 'the writer for whom his writing is primarily an art, who is as much concerned with style as with content; the understanding of whose writings, therefore, depends as much upon appreciation of style as upon comprehension of content.' Literature, for the man of letters, who not only writes about it but practices it by himself writing poetry, fiction or drama, provides wisdom beyond all other wisdoms, surpassing science, social science, history and philosophy, while incorporating them all.*

*The man of letters, like the poet, has a responsibility to the language, for, to quote Eliot, 'unless we have those few men who combine an exceptional sensibility with an exceptional power over words, our own ability, not merely to express, but even to feel any but the crudest emotions, will degenerate.' He is also responsible, as Eliot wrote in his essay 'The Function of Criticism' (1923), for 'the reorientation of tradition' in the arts, and, like the artist, is 'the perpetual upsetter of conventional values, the restorer of the real.'*

*The responsibility of the man of letters is finally for the culture at large. [Eliot] writes about Shakespeare as if he were a contemporary. He writes, in other words, [...] 'with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer [...] has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.'*<sup>148</sup>

Joseph Epstein

Just as Hans Küng's ideal of *Grundvertrauen* ('Basic Trust in Life') is enriched by contact with diverse stories from all over the world<sup>149</sup>,

---

<sup>148</sup> Joseph Epstein, 'The Collected Prose of T.S. Eliot Review: Keeper of the Flame', [https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-collected-prose-of-t-s-eliot-review-tradition-keeper-of-the-flame-joseph-epstein-11637943045?st=xqkxpbzlazgv9ph&reflink=desktopwebshare\\_permalink](https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-collected-prose-of-t-s-eliot-review-tradition-keeper-of-the-flame-joseph-epstein-11637943045?st=xqkxpbzlazgv9ph&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink), 26/11/2021 (accessed 30/11/2021).

<sup>149</sup> My 2018 book *From Global Ethic to World Ethos? Building on Hans Küng's Legacy of Basic Trust in Life* aims to remain true to its subtitle.

Fromm's generic signpost notion of 'biophilia' or 'love of life' is reducible neither to a pithy scientific definition nor to the familiar myths of 'Falstaff and Don Juan'<sup>150</sup>: we must all bravely construct and creatively reconstruct the cultural context which gives our lives meaning, thereby embodying the best of the education we have received. Denis Cotta chooses the following Fromm quote as the epigraph to his 2020 book *A experiência religiosa católica do Encontro de Casais com Cristo*:

It is entirely possible in our society to be a good Christian or Jew, that is, a human being moved by love, without dying of hunger. What matters is having the competence and courage necessary to stick to the truth and follow one's love, instead of giving up in favour of a highpaying 'career', of material success at any cost.<sup>151</sup>

This may all sound a bit glib coming from a bestselling author like Fromm, but the humanistic point stands: 'For Fromm,' Cotta writes, 'authentic love [...] offers the individual a path to integration with the other without the loss of her individuality.'<sup>152</sup> Instead of viewing the object of one's love as a reflection of one's self - real or ideal - or as a mere enabler of one's own material flourishing, love offers a transcendence of the entire dialectic of self, in which the active and creative combination of self with other takes precedence. This process is an art ('the art of loving'), not a science; such a 'resignification' of love is 'less a synonym of affect or sentiment than of an internal activity' akin to 'carpentry, music, painting and poetry, among others.'<sup>153</sup> The immature need for reciprocated love must be transcended in this activity: 'Love in [Fromm's ideal] sense is actively generated inside oneself and radiated outward, whether the love is requited or not.'<sup>154</sup>

Fromm worries that modern 'mercantilist' society systematically denies its citizens the baseline material and emotional security necessary they need for such mature love. Although sex is ubiquitously marketed in this society as the apotheosis of human desire, animal

---

<sup>150</sup> Gurevich, 'Razrushitelnoe v Cheloveke Kak Tajna', p. 12.

<sup>151</sup> Denis Cotta, *A experiência religiosa católica do Encontro de Casais com Cristo (ECC): uma análise sob a perspectiva da psicanálise humanista de Erich Fromm*, (Curitiba: CRV, 2020).

<sup>152</sup> See Cotta, 2020, p. 112-113.

<sup>153</sup> Cotta, 2020, p. 114.

<sup>154</sup> Cotta, 2020, p. 114.

passion at best offers a gateway or 'internship' for a lifelong creative and productive relationship.<sup>155</sup> All sado-masochistic dialectics - physical and psychological - must in any case be overcome; although Fromm insists on human beings' 'existential need for relationships', these relationships require the maintenance of 'the integrity of one's own subjectivity', or in other words: 'As the individual unites with the other, she maintains her individuality through the art of a mature love.'<sup>156</sup> The prophetic hopefulness of Fromm's humanistic vision resides in his faith in the transformative power of such love over time: 'For Fromm, the capacity to radiate love produces more love [around oneself], generating a force which strengthens both [oneself and the surrounding world].'<sup>157</sup> Though there may always be extreme cases of individual psychopathology where no amount of your love will ever penetrate my shield, these extreme exceptions prove the general rule of possibility in this sphere.

The 'productive character orientation' required for all this love naturally forms, or begins to form, in a healthy childhood. Cotta may state the obvious here, but we will restate it anyway:

For Fromm, the love of parents for their children is of the utmost importance for the psychological and emotional development of these children: its presence or absence will have positive or negative effects in the subject's adult life. [Fromm], moreover, stresses that the parents must exercise faith, namely faith in their child's potential. [...] If this faith is lacking in a child's parents or guardians, the child may develop pathological modes of interaction with others, leading to problems in intimate adult relationships.'<sup>158</sup>

This 'faith' is clearly general rather than specific, a trust given to children to realise themselves as they see fit, not a faith in any specific talent. Beyond untenable and outdated Freudian psychobabble about 'maternal' (unconditional) and 'paternal' (conditional) love, the Frommian ideal consists in the emergence of a mature and self-critical 'humanistic conscience' as opposed to a mere 'authoritarian' superego which internalises, out of fear and/or slavish admiration, the dictates of

---

<sup>155</sup> See Cotta, 2020, p. 115.

<sup>156</sup> Cotta, 2020, p. 116.

<sup>157</sup> Cotta, 2020, p. 116.

<sup>158</sup> Cotta, 2020, pp. 116-117.

authority.<sup>159</sup> Only such liberation for autonomous inner life will allow the adult subject to enjoy intimate relationships which are more than a co-dependent *egoismo a dois*: 'If the subject only loves her partner, then she is not loving productively. [...] A mature and productive love must embrace something broader, [ultimately] a love of life, of the process of living.'<sup>160</sup> Such biophilia does not grow out of the 'conditional' recognition - the rewards and punishments - that a normal young human being will still need in order to grow into a functioning member of a primate society; rather, it rests on a deeper attachment to life as a whole, made possible by a guardian or guardians who enjoy such a stable attachment themselves - and therefore feel no need for vicarious redemption in the concrete achievements of their children.<sup>161</sup>

Such parental trust in our discrete capabilities, Cotta argues further, is the basis of our stable adult relationship with ourselves as well as our 'relationship with God, Heaven or the transcendental'<sup>162</sup>:

Fromm shares Freud's critique of the dominant view of God in contemporary society as the 'primordial Father' before whom one should dependently kneel, thereby renouncing one's own potential. Fromm, however, argues that Freud [missed] 'the real crux of monotheistic religion, the logic of which leads to a direct rejection of such an [authoritarian] conception of God.' For Fromm, therefore, a subject guided by a [mature] religiosity will not view God as a 'crutch', whether psychological, financial or otherwise. [...] The mature religious person 'has faith in the principles that "God" represents; she thinks in terms of truth, embodies love and justice, and values her life as a whole insofar as it offers her the chance for an ever greater unfolding of her [unique] powers as a discrete human being. [...] She may even stop mentioning God's name altogether.' [Fromm] emphasises the fact that the experience of love for God, whatever one's

---

<sup>159</sup> Cotta is less clear than Rainer Funk on this point. See Funk, in *Erich Fromm: The Courage to be Human*, (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. 131-132.

<sup>160</sup> Cotta, 2020, p. 119.

<sup>161</sup> Natalia Ginzburg's *Le piccole virtù* (1962) is the best meditation I know on this subject. I discuss it on pp. 40-61 of *Peking Eulogy*.

<sup>162</sup> Here Fromm directly echoes reformist Christian theologians like Hans Küng and Confucian humanists like Tu Weiming. See, for instance, pp. 11-35 of *From Global Ethic to World Ethos?* and pp. 579-582 of *Peking Eulogy*.

religious background, can only be expressed in one's own act of living.'<sup>163</sup>

Cotta then turns to Fromm's diagnosis of 'the [forms of] disintegration of love in contemporary society'<sup>164</sup> with which we are by now familiar, and against which the Encontro de Casais com Cristo (ECC) - a form of Brazilian Christian couples' therapy - is intended to offer a certain protection in a specific local context. Cotta's critical discussion of the ECC's work from a Frommian perspective will not concern us directly here; rather, his useful contemporary overview of Fromm's biophilic terrain allows us to return afresh to where we started this chapter, namely with T.S. Eliot. In the light of Cotta's summary, one begins to see the fatal flaw in Eliot's character:

If fame is the name of your desire, writing about literature is among the least likely ways to find it. [But] the young T.S. Eliot was also a careerist, fully aware what would bring him the prominence and ultimately the fame he craved. Eliot wrote to J.H. Woods, one of his teachers at Harvard, that there were two ways to succeed in the literary life in England: one being to appear in print everywhere, the other to appear less frequently but always to dazzle.

[...] If Eliot's career marks a straight line of ascent, all onward and upward, his personal life was marred by bumps and potholes along the way. He suffered a nervous breakdown in his early 30s. He made a wretched marriage to an Englishwoman named Vivienne Haigh-Wood, who may well have been bipolar, a marriage that he likened to 'a Dostoyevsky novel' and ended in separation in 1933. She would occasionally show up at his lectures or poetry readings carrying a sign that said 'I Am The Wife He Abandoned.'<sup>165</sup>

Equally telling is Eliot's desire for recognition in the European fatherland:

In his late 20s Eliot would write of Henry James, whom he much admired, that 'it is the final perfection, the consummation of an

---

<sup>163</sup> Cotta, 2020, p. 121.

<sup>164</sup> Cotta, 2020, pp. 121-123.

<sup>165</sup> Epstein, 'Keeper of the Flame'.

American to become, not an Englishman, but a European—something which no born European, no person of any European nationality, can become.’ Cosmopolitan in interest and outlook though he was, Eliot went on to become an Englishman to the highest power: He applied for British citizenship, at the age of 39, in 1927, the same year he was confirmed in the Church of England. So rigidly English did he seem that Virginia Woolf called him ‘the man in the four-piece suit’.<sup>166</sup>

Born in remote St. Louis, Missouri in 1888, Eliot exercised his vocation of ‘man of letters’ with admirable autonomy and bravery (‘all this while he gave lectures, wrote ‘The Waste Land’ and other of his famous poems along with an immense number of reviews and essays, and accepted the leadership of such good causes as that of the survival of the London Library and of various struggling charities’<sup>167</sup>), but he was beset by a debilitating provincial status anxiety that, as Joseph Epstein suggests in his review of Eliot’s *Collected Prose*, made any sort of ‘productive’ marital love unlikely. Eliot even incriminates himself: ‘I came to persuade myself that I was in love with Vivienne simply because I wanted to burn my boats and commit myself to staying in England. [...] To her, the marriage brought no happiness. To me, it brought the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*.’<sup>168</sup>

Not even the greatest standard-bearers of Culture, in other words, are ever going to be perfect embodiments of it in their everyday lives. This should not, however, distract us from the ideal, which Cotta summarises in his epigraph: only a modicum of fame and wealth are needed for human freedom. The paradoxical crisis which ‘culture’ faces, amid ‘the detritus of the digital age’<sup>169</sup> which Epstein so laments, is precisely that attention must be won for a project beyond all attention-seeking. Cotta is wise to focus on the married couple as the smallest social microcosm or unit of Frommian biophilic concern, but he also shows that this sphere of concern extends all the way out or up to ‘Heaven’ itself, encompassing our relationship with reality as a whole. As Hans Küng put it, ‘without Basic Trust in life, no one can behave

---

<sup>166</sup> Epstein, ‘Keeper of the Flame’.

<sup>167</sup> Epstein, ‘Keeper of the Flame’.

<sup>168</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume 1, 1898-1922*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. xvii.

<sup>169</sup> Epstein, ‘Keeper of the Flame’.

ethically'; Fromm's concept of biophilia amounts to much the same thing: a person who does not love life as a whole will be incapable of loving an individual person, including her spouse or even her own self, in a mature way. Fromm's humanistic psychoanalysis aimed to offer paths to such biophilia for those in need; for Frommian reasons which Cotta clearly delineates, the 'in need' group means children of modernity from Brazil to Britain to Belarus to Burkina Faso. No less a cultural giant than T.S. Eliot belonged to it.

## 8. Librizzi: Ethical Destinies

*Whatever God's will actually was, [Rawls] decided, it would have to accord with the most basic ideas of justice that we have—thereby ruling out [his] lieutenant's assertion that God had selective concerns for one side in a clearly godless war. What else could the will of an all-just God be? By that same token, what else could justice be? If absolutely nothing else, any true God would have to be fair. [...] When Rawls returned to Princeton, his wartime trauma and disillusionment led him to abandon his interest in theology and to turn instead to political philosophy in his search for a system that would ground political decision-making in an objective morality rather than in God or fealty to the state. [...] Rawls was trying to find something to stand in place of the God that had abandoned him and his enemies alike on the battlefield as well as the two siblings who had died when he was growing up—but it also had to be something that did not involve simply trusting in the state. Neither the God he had lost faith in nor the military he had served in could be fair, Rawls contended—but perhaps, if we relied on the kinds of rules that could emerge from rational decision-making processes, society could be.<sup>170</sup>*

Olúfémi O. Táíwò

Mirella Librizzi's *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm* (1979) begins by situating Fromm's theory of 'self-creation' in the context of modern European thought: 'For the philosophers of the 18th and 19th Centuries, and in particular for Goethe, Herder, Hegel and Comte, man is able to achieve ever higher stages of development, insofar as each individual possesses, or inherits, not only her own individuality, but also, potentially, the entire accumulated wisdom of

---

<sup>170</sup> Olúfémi O. Táíwò, 'Selective Conscience: John Rawls's Doctrine of Fairness', 27/11/2021 (accessed 1/12/2021).

humanity.<sup>171</sup> If Marx and Freud are the two most obvious influences on Fromm's *oeuvre*, Fromm's 'socialist humanism' and 'humanistic social psychology' transcend them to offer a 'vision and explanation' of 'the process of human self-creation in History.'<sup>172</sup> This 'History' is not a fixed narrative, and nor is the human nature which emerges in it, because these natures embrace 'our most beautiful inclinations as well as the ugliest.'<sup>173</sup> Even as society exerts its pressure in conscious and unconscious ways, it is ultimately up to us which of these tendencies will manifest against the shifting backdrop.

The quest for a 20th-century 'socialist humanism' attracted a variety political thinkers and activists united by 'a common interest in human beings and the full revelation of their potential, [which naturally required] a critical attitude towards political reality, and towards ideology in particular.'<sup>174</sup> Fromm approaches the socialist humanism challenge by first conceding, in Librizzi's Orwellian paraphrase, that 'concepts like liberty, socialism, humanism and God are used today in an alienated, purely ideological sense.'<sup>175</sup> Fromm seeks to penetrate this veil of ideological ignorance by embodying, across his *oeuvre*, an optimistic 'attitude that the truth can be reached in liberty'.<sup>176</sup> This anti-authoritarian ethos has deep historical roots ('the most radical humanistic spirit is already to be found in [pre-Christian] rabbinical and prophetic literature'<sup>177</sup>), but even in its more modern forms it has tended to elicit a kneejerk reaction to injustice and oppression rather than a positive program:

Humanism has always been seen as a form of defence against a threat facing humanity; in the Renaissance, for example, as an antidote to medieval religious fanaticism; and in our time, as a defence against the fear created by the threat of technology and our possible reduction to a new form of slavery. [...] Fromm,

---

<sup>171</sup> Mirella Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, (Padova: CEDAM, 1979), p. 8.

<sup>172</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 11.

<sup>173</sup> Fromm in Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 11.

<sup>174</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 12.

<sup>175</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 12.

<sup>176</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 12.

<sup>177</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 18.

more optimistically, defines humanism as 'faith in the unicity of the human race and in the capacity of individual human beings to perfect themselves through their own efforts.'<sup>178</sup>

These efforts, however, do not take place in a vacuum: a free individual 'can only exist in an economic and social system which, thanks to its rationality and abundance, puts an end to the long period of human prehistory and inaugurates the epoch of History as such, in which the full development of the individual human being - a condition for the full development of society and *vice versa* - is possible.'<sup>179</sup>

This society of flourishing individuals overcomes the 'essential dichotomy' at the heart of any socialist humanism: it succeeds in avoiding the 'levelling temptation to believe oneself to be happy while obeying mass conditioning', but also in overcoming the 'isolation of those who rise up in search of liberty only to be led into [the] desperate alienation' of exile.<sup>180</sup> The storehouse of culture alone allows the autonomous critical spirit to endure the ostracism of her immediate tribe; a link to something bigger is forged:

Man, Fromm continues, is 'a joke of nature, thrown into the world without his permission, torn from it against his will.' [...] For Fromm, the only way to resolve this [existential crisis] is to find a new form of belonging, [...] a new unity via capacities for reason and love, [...] and thus to become a free, self-creating individual. [...] As this process of self-distancing from the 'prehistoric unity of tribe and nature' advances, and as this sense of [cultural] self develops, 'the individual can either unite with the world as a whole in a spontaneous spirit of love and productive activity, or else seek security in [fascistic] ties which destroy her liberty and the integrity of her individual being.

The social history of human beings begins as the individual, emerging from a state of unity with nature and the clan around her, becomes aware of herself as a discrete [existential] entity.<sup>181</sup>

---

<sup>178</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>179</sup> Fromm in Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 13.

<sup>180</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 14.

<sup>181</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, pp. 15-17.

The dream of a liberated cosmopolitanism of the spirit, not 'rootless' but transplanted to a higher existential plane, is beset by all-too-human obstacles:

Total independence [from tribal instincts] is hard work; even if we overcome our fixations with blood and soil, mother and clan, we tend to cling to other objects offering security and certainty: the nation, the group, the family, our success, our money. We may even become so narcissistic that the whole world becomes a mere extension of our own selves.<sup>182</sup>

Whereas Renaissance and Enlightenment confidence in the ultimate goodness of human nature (present down to Marx and beyond) was a reaction - and ultimately an overreaction - to perverted Christian notions of original sin, Fromm's 20th-century socialist humanism - witness to two world wars - offers a more balanced and grounded optimism: human beings are 'capable of good and evil. As long as these inclinations remain in relative equilibrium, the individual is free to choose. [...] But if her heart has hardened to the point that some part of this spectrum of inclinations is occluded, she is no longer free to choose.'<sup>183</sup> The process of Frommian self-cultivation or 'self-creation' via culture that Librizzi describes does not entail an obliteration of our evil inclinations - those concentration camp guards still enjoyed their Beethoven - but rather allows the individual the *chance* to fashion an independent conscience and to act as the unalienated arbiter of her own life. The Siren's call of the tribe, however, or of other more modern modes of security (e.g. money), is never far away from a being 'thrown into the world without his permission, torn from it against his will.' A moment's rational reflection, however, will allow us to realise that such security cannot be prolonged indefinitely, and hence that our 'ethical destinies' as free individuals ultimately matter more than any political or financial security we may temporarily seek for ourselves.

In her third chapter, Librizzi connects this 'faith in man's ethical destiny' to a certain relationship with 'truth': 'For Fromm, the need for a felt religiosity is part of the intimate essence of human nature.'<sup>184</sup> Echoing Hans Küng even further, Fromm argues for the rationality, or at

---

<sup>182</sup> Fromm in Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 19.

<sup>183</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>184</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 88.

least the non-irrationality, of a certain biophilic faith which is ‘an element in the structure of life itself, [...] a trust in that which has not yet been proven.’<sup>185</sup> The concept of ‘faith’, however, has also too often fallen victim to authoritarian ideology: ‘Faith in this [perverted] sense is the possession of a response for which there is no rational evidence whatsoever; it consists of formulations elaborated by others which are accepted because we submit to these others and join a safe hierarchy.’<sup>186</sup> This ‘renunciation of ideological independence’ requires the ‘grave and ongoing preference for immersion in an oasis of [false] certainty and “definitive, infallible knowledge made credible by the seemingly irresistible power of those who promulgate and defend it”.’<sup>187</sup> Calling on Fromm’s *To Have or To Be*, Librizzi argues that a spirituality oriented towards ‘being’ rather than the craven materialism and fear of ‘having’ will offer its bearer a faith which expresses ‘an intimate orientation, an attitude, [...] a certainty which is rooted in one’s *own* experience, not in submission to an authority which imposes a certain set of beliefs.’<sup>188</sup> The challenge for anyone who, like Fromm, takes psychoanalysis and social psychology seriously is to chisel away the authoritarian influences - conscious and unconscious - which work away on us in our jobs, in our leisure time, and even in our sleep. To seek to build a society of such liberated individuals, however, requires an extraordinary optimism - namely that the diffusion of an unalienated, ‘biophilic’ spirituality will lead to pro-social consequences rather than destructive ones. If every citizen is ultimately called to exercise and trust her own conscience, and if no higher court than this is recognised, then law and order are relativised: we should only obey the laws we think we should obey. If everyone is called to behave like this, then one must trust both the process and the outcome of Frommian psychoanalysis - *for oneself and for everyone else*. Fromm himself clearly does so: ‘In authoritarian religions, sin is above all disobedience, [...] while in humanistic ones, “it is heard as such in conscience, not in a mechanical reproduction of the voice of authority, but in the voice of the liberated individual herself.”’<sup>189</sup> Rejecting all forms of legalist cynicism, Fromm

---

<sup>185</sup> Fromm in Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 89.

<sup>186</sup> Fromm in Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 89.

<sup>187</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 89.

<sup>188</sup> Fromm in Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 90.

<sup>189</sup> See Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 93.

identifies true social 'peace' with this 'completion' of human individuality in which human beings everywhere 'become fully themselves'<sup>190</sup>; Marx only sought to build on this insight - traceable to Spinoza's *Ethics* - 'at the sociopolitical level', while Freud helped to unlock the unconscious dimension of authoritarian oppression.<sup>191</sup> Fromm, Librizzi argues, shares the 'realist humanism' of Spinoza, Marx and Freud, which is 'supported by a profound faith in the force and creativity of human nature.'<sup>192</sup> This humanistic turn in modern theology, a 'slow movement from Buddha to Marx', involves the 'gradual substitution of traditional religions' and 'the elimination of dogma and the hierarchical institutions deriving from it.'<sup>193</sup> In what might as well as have been a direct quote from Hans Küng, Librizzi ends by quoting Fromm instead: such a humanistic turn in global spirituality naturally requires, among other revolutions, 'that the Roman Catholic Church, starting from the very top, convert to the humanistic spirit.'<sup>194</sup>

To finish a chapter once again where we started (namely with Olúfémi O. Táíwò), postwar Western liberal philosophy, as represented in the uniquely influential political theory of John Rawls, also stops short of the Frommian ideal:

Indonesia was simply one of 22 third world countries in which the United States facilitated mass murder between the end of World War II and the 1990s—at which point [...] international politics finally attracted Rawls's consideration. Throughout the period of the Vietnam War, liberation movements confronted US-supported apartheid regimes in wars of national liberation: in Mozambique, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, and South Africa. What differentiated Vietnam from these struggles? I can hazard a guess: their lack of major deployments of US troops, and thus a link for a domestically focused philosopher like Rawls to consider.

To his credit, Rawls was a vocal and public opponent of the Vietnam War from the beginning. But amid all the global carnage,

---

<sup>190</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>191</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 95.

<sup>192</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 96.

<sup>193</sup> Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 96.

<sup>194</sup> Fromm in Librizzi, *Condizione umana e problematica religiosa in E. Fromm*, p. 96.

it was the draft deferments that he chose to organize against. *The primacy of domestic justice and the 'natural duty' of social stability* directed his political action toward fighting the unjust distribution of draft cards in the United States rather than the unjust distribution of napalm and Agent Orange in Southeast Asia. One would be on principled grounds to insist, contra Rawls's own theory and pattern of political action, that addressing the latter injustice ought to have far outweighed addressing the former. Such an approach might acknowledge—as a younger and perhaps wiser Rawls had clearly been willing to do—that neither God nor justice should care whether you were American or Vietnamese.<sup>195</sup> [italics mine]

Fromm's liberalism and humanism are indeed more radical than this: he bets the entire house of global 'social stability' - and lasting peace in a nuclear world - on the liberation of individuals everywhere from authoritarian and nationalistic forces.

---

<sup>195</sup> Olúfémi O. Táíwò, 'Selective Conscience: John Rawls's Doctrine of Fairness'.

## 9. Ai: Qiqihar Junior Teachers' College

*Solzhenitsyn painstakingly and minutely demonstrates — rather than simply states — how order is more important than freedom, since without order there can be no freedom for anybody. [...] The strong, he says, know how to lead and also how to obey, whereas the weak 'require the illusion of independence.' Order, no matter how complex the social organism, rests upon some kind of chain of command or multiple chains of command. Hierarchy is everything, especially in Russia, which was a huge and geographically endless organism lacking a real middle class. Given this and the way in which events [in 1917] unfolded, the only question was what kind of dictatorship Russia would have.<sup>196</sup>*

Robert D. Kaplan

Manfred Zimmer has covered the bewilderingly extensive reception of Erich Fromm in China: the short summary of Zimmer's summary is that Chinese is now - along with English, German and Spanish - one of the four main languages in which Fromm scholarship is conducted.<sup>197</sup> If Fromm would scarcely have approved of continued Communist Party authoritarianism under Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, and if there are still 'a good number of Fromm critics in China', at least Fromm would have enjoyed seeing 'his views on the dilemmas facing modern man being used,' among other things, 'to make critical commentaries on government mismanagement.'<sup>198</sup> Moreover, Zimmer says, 'there are extensive debates in Chinese on Frommian concepts

---

<sup>196</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, 'Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Masterpiece Is Finally Appearing', <https://spectatorworld.com/book-and-art/aleksandr-solzhenitsyn-masterpiece-appearing/>, 18/11/2021 (accessed 3/12/2021).

<sup>197</sup> See Manfred Zimmer, 'Erich Fromm en China: Reseña de la recepción de su pensamiento', in Rainer Funk and Neil McLaughlin (eds.), *Hacia una ciencia humana: La relevancia de Erich Fromm en la actualidad*, tr. Roberto Andrés Haas García, (México: DEMAC, 2017). Or naturally consult the English original in *Towards a Human Science: The Relevance of Erich Fromm For Today*, (Giessen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2015).

<sup>198</sup> Zimmer, 'Erich Fromm en China', p. 410.

like “social character”, “fear of freedom”, “alienation”, “socialist humanism” and “the art of loving”, as well as interesting applications of Frommian psychoanalysis and social psychology to literature and art.’<sup>199</sup> While many of these ‘applications’ take the unfortunate form of ‘Frommian readings’, and hence reductions, of artworks and literary texts, at least such themes are allowed and, in some cases, even actively promoted.<sup>200</sup> One is free to ask whether this apparent tolerance for Fromm owes more to the fact that academic discourse poses no serious threat to the authoritarian state’s monopoly on power, or to the fact that Fromm, by opposing Western imperialism and capitalism and broadly endorsing Marx, declares himself the enemy of China’s own ideological enemies. In any case, the People’s Republic hardly seems like a country Fromm would climb out of his grave in 2022 to defend, so his enthusiastic reception there remains a curious and important phenomenon that humanists everywhere might observe and - cautiously - celebrate.

Of the hundreds of articles one could have chosen to represent this wave of Chinese interest, Ai Qingqing’s short 2016 article on ‘the importance of Erich Fromm’s theory of love for students’ personality education’ is perhaps a curious choice (a couple of old friends at Peking University certainly think so).<sup>201</sup> And yet the very existence of such an article on Fromm by a graduate student at Chongqing Jiaotong University (Sichuan Province) in the journal of Qiqihar Junior Teachers’ College (Heilongjiang Province) ought to remind foreign readers that the reception of Fromm in China extends far beyond a couple of leafy European precincts in Shanghai and the Haidian area of the capital where Peking University and Tsinghua University are located. What Ai finds interesting in Fromm is certainly interesting: ‘Modern man has cast off his tribal bonds with nature and has no way of returning to them. [...] The goal of our feverish [modern] efforts to enhance our rationality has been to develop a more harmonious form of relationship with each other and the world, and to replace [unstable] tribal instincts and arrangements.’<sup>202</sup> The problem, however, is that ‘powerful feelings of solitude and alienation have followed us on this path from the communal

---

<sup>199</sup> Zimmer, ‘Erich Fromm en China’, p. 410.

<sup>200</sup> See Zimmer, ‘Erich Fromm en China’, pp. 420-423.

<sup>201</sup> Ai Qingqing, ‘*Fulomu Ai de Jiaoyu Lilun dui Daxuesheng Renge Jiaoyu de Qishi*’, *Qiqihar Junior Teachers’ College Journal*, No. 4 (2016), pp. 12-13.

<sup>202</sup> Ai, ‘*Fulomu Ai de Jiaoyu Lilun dui Daxuesheng Renge Jiaoyu de Qishi*’, p. 12.

life of the tribe to the individual life of meaning and higher purpose promised by modern humanism.’<sup>203</sup> Fromm’s ‘art of loving’ holds the key to this transformation: ‘Fromm creates a new conception of love beyond the mere instinctual variety; this productive love becomes the expression of a healthy [modern] personality.’<sup>204</sup>

The 1993-born Ai clearly has her own recent experience as a university student in mind when she describes the ‘unproductive character orientation’ the Chinese system fosters: ‘The main goal of tertiary education [in this country] is to impart technical knowledge in order to allow us to participate in the work of building the infrastructure of a [modern] society,’ Ai plausibly deduces, but the result is ‘a widespread absence of high ideals and political convictions, a lack of any sense of active contribution to the common good’ and a subsequent ‘reliance on authority’ to ‘assume the burdens of responsibility and duty’.<sup>205</sup> This is, in short, a damning indictment of the Chinese Communist Party’s education policy; that such a critique is allowed to appear in the journal of Qiqihar Junior Teachers’ College suggests either incomprehension of the message on the part of local officials or a misunderstanding of Chinese censorship on the part of Western observers - or most likely both. Ai describes the ‘blind exam fever’ suffered *en masse* by Chinese students as a ‘symptom of the marketing orientation’<sup>206</sup> that has overcome the country since the start of the Reform and Opening Up period under Deng Xiaoping in 1978: the pressure on students to turn themselves into brands by burnishing their CVs with first-class university degrees from leading institutions is unrivalled anywhere in the world (well, outside East Asia). This perversion of the original Confucian emphasis on humanistic and protomodern ‘learning for the self’ even goes beyond the earlier abuses of Confucian philosophy enshrined in the rote learning of Confucian

---

<sup>203</sup> Ai, ‘*Fulomu Ai de Jiaoyu Lilun dui Daxuesheng Renge Jiaoyu de Qishi*’, p. 12. This is a loose rendition of Ai’s Chinese text (even by my standards), but I believe it captures her message. The dilemma whether to add quotation marks is, as it often should be for translators, quite genuine; the dangers of both doing so and not doing so should be obvious. My translator’s debt to pioneering compatriot H.M Posnett (1855-1927), coiner of the pithy definition of modernity as the ‘shift from communal to individual life’, should also be recognised.

<sup>204</sup> Ai, ‘*Fulomu Ai de Jiaoyu Lilun dui Daxuesheng Renge Jiaoyu de Qishi*’, p. 12.

<sup>205</sup> Ai, ‘*Fulomu Ai de Jiaoyu Lilun dui Daxuesheng Renge Jiaoyu de Qishi*’, p. 13.

<sup>206</sup> Ai, ‘*Fulomu Ai de Jiaoyu Lilun dui Daxuesheng Renge Jiaoyu de Qishi*’, p. 13.

texts for the imperial examination system, a thousand-year-old tradition which reached its disastrous apotheosis in Qing times.<sup>207</sup>

Ai is particularly concerned with the relations *between* Chinese university students: rather than seeking to sabotage each other's academic progress in a zero-sum jungle, these students should be encouraged to encourage each other, to find strength in the success of their classmates and roommates, and to help those around them as an extension of their own productive activities and orientations. This all requires that Chinese educators take the challenge of 'psychological health' as seriously as Fromm did: 'The first thing is to trust that one's own existence makes sense,'<sup>208</sup> Ai concludes. In the 'ethical confusion of the Internet Age' and the 'social multiplicity' generated by globalisation<sup>209</sup>, this task of humanistic education - traceable to the Axial civilisations (including Confucian civilisation) but 'modern' *par excellence* - has not necessarily been made easier. In any case, as Ai herself intuits, such education is incompatible with authoritarian nationalism; Fromm's 'productive orientation' is inherently internationalist in precisely the sense that Cornel West praises the work of Frantz Fanon:

Fanon is first and foremost a revolutionary whose artistry in language, speech, and political praxis bids us to resist and overthrow all forms of dogma and domination that subjugate oppressed peoples. (Note his 'final prayer' in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952): 'O my body, always make me a man who questions!'). This intense Socratic energy—aligned with what he calls 'African self-criticism'—yields a thoroughgoing internationalism that passes through a genuine national consciousness:

Self-awareness does not mean closing the door on communication. Philosophy teaches us on the contrary that it is its guarantee. National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is alone capable of giving us an international dimension... It is at the heart of national

---

<sup>207</sup> See pp. 480-481 of *Peking Eulogy* for my summary of Tu Weiming's article 'Song-Ming Ruxue de Zhongxin Ketí', in which he discusses, among other themes, Confucian critiques of the imperial examination system.

<sup>208</sup> Ai, 'Fulomu Ai de Jiaoyu Lilun dui Daxuesheng Renge Jiaoyu de Qishi', p. 13.

<sup>209</sup> Ai, 'Fulomu Ai de Jiaoyu Lilun dui Daxuesheng Renge Jiaoyu de Qishi', p. 13.

consciousness that international consciousness establishes itself and thrives.

[...] All the elements for a solution to the major problems of humanity existed at one time or another in European thought. But the Europeans did not act on the mission that was designated to them. [...] The Third World must start over a new history of man which takes account of not only the occasional prodigious theses maintained by Europe but also its crimes. [...] For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man.

For Fanon, revolutionary internationalism—anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-white-supremacist—yields a new humanism that puts a premium on the psychic, social, and political needs of poor and working peoples—a solidarity and universality from below.

Yet Fanon's revolutionary internationalism and new humanism were betrayed by new national bourgeoisies from every corner of the globe. [...] The task of full-fledged decolonization and wholesale democratization with genuine socialist options remains unfinished. Let us not betray our mission—just as Frantz Fanon never sold his soul nor betrayed his prophetic vocation!<sup>210</sup>

*Realpolitik* coexistence with China seems possible, at least in the mid-term, but a deeper question remains concerning the possibility of humanistic dialogue with any state which instrumentalises its young citizens - deliberately or otherwise - for the developmental purposes Ai describes. The 'dialogue among civilisational equals' which the Chinese Communist Party now officially promotes as its foreign policy<sup>211</sup> presupposes 'respect' for the sovereignty of the Party over its own territory; such 'respect', however, does not on its own guarantee the economic and social security - the 'personal sovereignty', as Yanis

---

<sup>210</sup> Cornel West, 'Cornel West on Frantz Fanon, One of the Great Revolutionary Intellectuals of the 20th Century', <https://lithub.com/cornel-west-on-frantz-fanon-one-of-great-revolutionary-intellectuals-of-the-20th-century/>, 6/12/2021 (accessed 9/12/2021).

<sup>211</sup> See, for instance, Wu Xia and Sun Ping, 'Xiplomacy', [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-05/16/c\\_139949510.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-05/16/c_139949510.htm), 16/5/2019 (accessed 11/3/2022).

Varoufakis calls it<sup>212</sup> - of individual human beings, which is the real prerequisite for biophilic cultural exchange. Like healthy individuals, cultural traditions survive and thrive not only on self-determination but above all, as West says, on critical 'communication'<sup>213</sup>. The path to the 'productive orientation' and 'psychological health' that Ai envisages for future Chinese citizens certainly passes through critical engagement with China's past and present, as well as with 'the best that has been thought and said' elsewhere; the crisis in Chinese humanistic education she describes, moreover, may only be different in degree from that experienced in the Scandinavian democracies, the root of which lies in a 'marketing orientation' which is now more or less the norm everywhere. And yet there is something in Xi Jinping's China of which Solzhenitsyn - arguably the least Frommian intellectual figure of the 20th Century, a veritable anti-Fromm - would be especially proud: an absolute insistence on the primacy of order over freedom. The 'clash of civilisations' we face is not 'Confucian China versus the West', 'Islam versus the West', or even Huntington's nightmare of a joint Confucian-Islamic front against Western values; it is a battle between Fromm's and Solzhenitsyn's views of human 'productivity'. There is no Iron Curtain in this ideological struggle; it is being played out everywhere, even within China itself.

---

<sup>212</sup> Yanis Varoufakis, 'Technofeudalism', [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ghx0sq\\_gXK4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ghx0sq_gXK4), 1/11/2021 (accessed 14/3/2022).

<sup>213</sup> West, 'Cornel West on Frantz Fanon'.

## 10. Kolakowski: Revenge of the Sacred

*The moment that people are educated to be aware of the facts [of gross material inequality], the inevitable result is envy in the poorer parts of the world. [...] Asia has risen to the point of education where it is not prepared any longer to be subservient to the white man. [...] Asia clearly is going to claim equality with the white man, and it is perfectly futile - absolutely futile - for the white man to resist that claim. [...] We ought, therefore, to concede it graciously at once.*

*[...] Both in education and in other matters, freedom must have very definite limitations: things that are harmful to other people, and things that prevent you yourself from being useful, such as lack of knowledge. [...] If I had the necessary capacity I think I would be a physicist. If my capacities didn't run in that direction, I should think that history, psychology - mass psychology especially, the theory of politics, things of that sort - are much more worth [studying these days] than pure philosophy. [...] If a philosophy is to bring happiness, it should be inspired by kindly feeling. Marx is not inspired by kindly feeling. Marx pretended that he wanted the happiness of the proletariat, but what he really wanted was the unhappiness of the bourgeoisie. It was because of that hate element that his philosophy produced disaster.<sup>214</sup>*

Bertrand Russell (1952)

Fromm's 'productive orientation', though not reducible to a 'desire to be useful', in no way precludes such a desire; Fromm's ideal modern citizen reserves the right to define her own terms of usefulness instead of being pigeonholed by a bureaucracy. This pigeonholing may always be going on in the social background to an individual life - Fromm made a career out of pointing this out - but it is both the duty and the pleasure of the modern individual to resist these efforts to instrumentalise her and to

---

<sup>214</sup> Bertrand Russell, 'A Conversation with Bertrand Russell' (1952), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xL\\_sMXfzzyA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xL_sMXfzzyA) (accessed 4/12/2021).

pick her own autonomous path through her post-tribal, post-industrial existence. Such spiritual equality, however, requires 'approximate economic equality'<sup>215</sup>, as Bertrand Russell foresaw; the *purpose* of economic growth is to provide such an equal basis for individual spiritual advancement. A legitimate reason - perhaps the only one - to envy the rich is that they are free from having to engage in alienated labour for the mere sake of a paycheck; unlike the rest of us, the 'rich' can do what they what - and hence be 'productive' on their own terms. Such financial independence may begin at relatively low (and increasingly realistically attainable) levels of income and asset wealth - provided of course that the 'marketing orientation' and other 'social character orientations' characteristic of modernity do not trap us in cycles of unnecessary and conspicuous overconsumption.

It is delicate work to liberate the modern individual - who only exists as such thanks to the love and nurture of an entire culture around and behind her - from the many negative side-effects of her sociality. As an author and practising psychoanalyst, Fromm worked on both the theoretical and practical fronts, though these entailed a third lifelong activity - *reading* - without which neither his books nor his analysis would have been possible. After searching in vain for a French secondary source on Fromm to jump out at me, I ended up chancing on something different in the archives, namely evidence of Fromm as a reader of French, and in particular, as the annotator of a 1974 volume titled *Le besoin religieux*.<sup>216</sup> Fromm is already busy highlighting chunks of Fernand-Lucien Mueller's 'Introduction':

It is still feasible to defend the Marxist idea of religion as a superstructure which will disappear with the end of social injustice. [...] And yet our recent history, far from pointing to the imminence of such a future, reveals instead an irrational sacralisation of the political. [...] Have traditional religions, meanwhile, not been too sure of themselves, too confident that the faith they preach is the only true one for human beings, and that other religions are mere deviations from the path? The interest now being shown in various [conservative] milieux, even within the Church, for Eastern religious thought perhaps signals

---

<sup>215</sup> Russell, 'A Conversation with Bertrand Russell' (1952).

<sup>216</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, Sadhu Singh Dharni, Roger Bastide and Roger Mehl, *Le besoin religieux: Textes des conférences et des entretiens organisés par les Rencontres Internationales de Genève* (1973), (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1974).

the arrival of a permanent paradigm shift: one can discern the beginnings of a spiritual renewal and a deepening of [dialogical] religiosity.<sup>217</sup>

Leszek Kolakowski's contribution to this volume - '*La revanche du sacré dans la culture profane*' - and Fromm's handmade annotations to it represent a meeting of minds between two of the leading critics of 20th-century totalitarianism. Kolakowski first attracts Fromm's attention with the following:

One often reads in the newspapers that politics has replaced religion, that the psychiatrist has assumed the social role of the priest, and that technological utopias have replaced eschatological dreams. This all seems plausible at first glance, and it is confirmed by simple observation: [contemporary] intellectuals are seeking spiritual assistance with psychiatrists, not in the confessional.<sup>218</sup>

Far from supporting the Marxist 'opium of the people' thesis as commonly understood, such phenomena in fact suggest, as Marx himself does, that the 'living flower' of individual spirituality will finally be able to culled once organised religion finds itself in the dustbin of history: 'The sacred must be present before it can be exploited: it is therefore absurd to say that the sacred is only the instrument of the interests that might take advantage of it.'<sup>219</sup> The deeper question for Kolakowski concerns the possibility of the atrophy of the 'need for spirituality' in the first place:

If 'secularisation' (in the formerly Christian world) means merely lower rates of participation in the activities of traditional Christian institutions, then we are on uncontroversial ground, although it would be a gross exaggeration to say that we fully understand the reasons; if industrialisation is undoubtedly involved, such 'secularisation' does not follow industrialisation according to an identifiable law: the most industrially advanced societies [i.e. the

---

<sup>217</sup> Fernand-Lucien Mueller, in *Le besoin religieux*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>218</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, '*La revanche du sacré dans la culture profane*', in *Le besoin religieux*, p. 15. All Kolakowski quotes translated here were highlighted by Fromm in his hand annotations.

<sup>219</sup> Kolakowski, '*La revanche du sacré dans la culture profane*', p. 17.

United States] are not necessarily the most 'secularised' in this sense. If, on the other hand, we define the process of secularisation as a weakening of the religious instinct, then we are on an even less secure footing. [...] I am not only thinking of the burgeoning [megachurch] phenomenon at the margins of traditional Christianity, the extraordinary proliferation of interest in the occult and other hermetic arts, the irruption of Eastern spiritualities in [formerly] Christian countries, or the emergence of other bizarre, grotesque and extravagant sects. I am also thinking of the remarkable number of conversions within traditional [Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox] Christianity itself.<sup>220</sup>

The fact, moreover, that many of us have transferred our tribal instincts away from organised religion and into the profane sphere - politics, sport and so on - ought not to obscure the question of religion's survival as individual spirituality in a post-tribal modernity:

We do not wish to stop at pointing out the obvious correlations between certain religious and profane practices: we seek to know more. The question we must not forbid ourselves from asking is this: alongside the many 'profane' functions that religion has long performed, and beyond the thousand ties which have made it inseparable from all forms of social activity and conflict and thereby yoked its fate to changes in secular society, is there an indestructible core of individual spirituality at its heart? And is this spirituality an inalienable element of human culture? We would like to know whether this individual spiritual need is indissoluble, or whether it can be replaced or repressed by other satisfactions.<sup>221</sup>

Kolakowski's answer - unsurprising for a philosopher famous for his withering critique of 20-century Marxist atheism as practised in his native Poland - is that such spirituality or religiosity (Marx's 'living flower') can indeed be threatened by modern totalitarian forces:

---

<sup>220</sup> Kolakowski, *'La revanche du sacré dans la culture profane'*, pp. 17-19.

<sup>221</sup> Kolakowski, *'La revanche du sacré dans la culture profane'*, p. 19.

To insist on a distinction between sacred and profane is to deny the total independence of the present earthly order and to recognise the *a priori* limits of any possible improvement here and now. Defined in opposition to the sacred, the profane is grasped in its intrinsic and more or less incurable imperfection. When a culture is deprived of all sense of the sacred, the very possibility of [individual] meaning evaporates. With the disappearance of the sacred, which imposed limits on the perfectibility of the profane, one of our civilisation's most dangerous illusions spreads like wildfire: namely, the idea that human life on Earth can be transformed in limitless ways, that society is absolutely malleable, and that to deny this absolute malleability and perfectibility is to thwart human autonomy and humanism itself. This illusion is not only mad; it is also destined to end in disastrous despair. The Nietzschean or Sartrean chimera so widespread among us - according to which a human being can liberate herself completely from *everything*, including all tradition and all preexisting forms of meaning - [...] does not open up some omnipotent godlike realm of self-creation to us all: it suspends us in darkness. In this void where everything is equally good, everything is the same as everything else. To believe that I am the all-powerful creator of all possible meaning is to believe that I have no reason at all to create anything in particular. [...] To extricate oneself entirely from the call of tradition is to place oneself in this void: it is a veritable explosion of the self. Meaning only comes from making some things special first; empirical research alone cannot produce it. The utopia of perfect human liberation from the past, and the dream of limitless perfection in the future, are perhaps the most effective weapons for its own suicide that human culture has ever invented.<sup>222</sup>

Kolakowski also warns against Rousseauian and other 'anarchist' myths of the noble savage, according to which 'human nature affirms itself only in becoming what it was before the advent of [modern] culture.'<sup>223</sup> This celebration of a 'non-domesticated animal' inevitably culminates in 'the sanction of force and violence, and therefore of despotism and the

---

<sup>222</sup> Kolakowski, '*La revanche du sacré dans la culture profane*', pp. 25-26.

<sup>223</sup> Kolakowski, '*La revanche du sacré dans la culture profane*', p. 26.

destruction of culture.’<sup>224</sup> A sense of history - which is at the same time ‘a sense that history is not all there is’ - is precisely what is needed for the humility which accompanies modern humanism, or the ability to ‘accept our lives as an inevitable defeat.’<sup>225</sup> Any pre- or post-cultural flight from death, any mere ‘dispersion in the contingency of the day’ - from Rousseau’s noble savage to Nietzsche’s brave and lonely *Übermensch* to Mishima’s post-literary fascist mindmeld of bodybuilding and military discipline - is equally dangerous: ‘Life in such a stasis becomes nothing more than the desperate and incessant desire to live, and finally a sense of regret at not having lived.’<sup>226</sup>

Kolakowski offers an ingenious window on the problem of Marxist historicism: namely, he shows us how a full and final philosophy of history - a permanent definition of what history is, unchangeable by us - is in fact the same thing as an abolition of history via an argument from total earthly freedom (Marx and Nietzsche hence meet in the same cultural and spiritual void, even if Marx and Nietzsche themselves may be less guilty of this nihilism than many of their intellectual descendants<sup>227</sup>). Fromm is concerned above all with the third of the three great so-called ‘masters of suspicion’ - Freud - but his concern is largely the same: by seeking to extricate the individual from the

---

<sup>224</sup> Kolakowski, ‘*La revanche du sacré dans la culture profane*’, p. 26.

<sup>225</sup> Kolakowski, ‘*La revanche du sacré dans la culture profane*’, pp. 26-27.

<sup>226</sup> Kolakowski, ‘*La revanche du sacré dans la culture profane*’, p. 26.

<sup>227</sup> One can understand Marx, as Pankaj Mishra partly does, as a spiritual thinker whose materialist theses are exaggerations for effect. See, for example, Pankaj Mishra, in Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, ‘The Liberal Establishment Is A Stranger to Self-Examination’, <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/qa-pankaj-mishra-bland-fanatics/>, 23/11/2020 (accessed 11/12/2021):

I still haven’t lost the conviction—echoed in *This Life*—that Marx was concerned above all with securing spiritual freedom. The doctrinaire aspects of the later Marx can be tedious. What remains perpetually fresh and regenerative in his work is its double inheritance of Christianity and Romanticism, which allows us to acknowledge new realities, such as widespread environmental degradation, and to break out of economistic frameworks that emphasize redistribution without really trying to overthrow oppressive modes of labor. What I found very attractive about Hägglund’s book is his reinterpretation of Marxism for a secular age and secularized audience without losing Marx’s vision of a broader spiritual liberation from modern forms of coercion. I also liked its emphasis on social interdependence, something that connects the Buddhist to Marxist tradition.

Nietzsche is also not easily reducible to the quick two-dimensional parody Kolakowski offers here in order to make his (nevertheless valid) point; in many ways Nietzsche, not least the Nietzsche of *The Gay Science*, can be understood as a *liberator* of modern spirituality from the clutches of conformist authoritarianism. I tackle this terrain, for example, on pp. 91-96 of my doctoral thesis *Warriors for Civilisation*.

millennial flow into which she was born and to solve her pathologies in a sociohistorical vacuum, Freud risks alienating her from the very sociality which gives her own life and unique personality meaning in the first place, even as it pressures and distorts her. If Marx's hatred of the bourgeoisie (and Nietzsche's hatred of Christianity) do indeed poison their work to some degree, Freud's deep scepticism of human nature and human possibility in general might have led him to neglect the social-psychological dimension - and ultimately, the *historical* and *cultural* dimension - which Fromm's more optimistic brand of psychoanalysis privileges: if society with its rewards and punishments is always threatening the autonomy of our conscious and unconscious lives, culture - understood as a 'making special' or 'making sacred' of works of art - offers the only possible liberation from such tyranny, not by placing such works beyond criticism, but precisely by keeping them alive in the minds of new generations who will build on them in their own creative ways.

We hope to have shown in these ten short chapters, however, that Fromm was much more than a social-scientific critic of Freud, and also more than the purveyor of a dated teleological philosophy. Fromm offers us a house which still stands, and which we can all comfortably visit with friends. Conversations can be enjoyed here which cannot quite be had elsewhere.

## **Part Two: Invited Guests**

## 11. Wallace: Mad Productivity

*Literature-as-culture has converged today with literature-as-commerce. In such a period, market roles merge with literary roles. So, 'for Amazon, authors' - regardless of genre - 'should consider themselves a kind of entrepreneur and service provider.' [...] The composition of a book once complete, shilling the thing goes on. As for readers, 'Amazon sees them as a customer with needs, above all a need for reliable sources of comfort.' The upshot of these transformations - author into 'authorpreneur', and reader into consumer - is to refashion book-reading as a form of 'retail therapy', in which various demographic slivers of the world's (or the US's) total readership simply seek out the comfort food of whichever genre more or less corresponds to their place in society. [...] If [we] follow Amazon's lead by regarding literature as a level site occupied by genres of equal stature, rather than a steeply graduated terrain formed by uneven deposits of art, this is merely in keeping with sociology's inaugural fact-value distinction. [...] But the ghost of artistic value can't quite be exorcised from the sociological machine.<sup>228</sup>*

Benjamin Kunkel

David Foster Wallace's 2004 reportage 'Consider the Lobster' self-harmingly challenges the terms of modern literary engagement. Flouting the conventions of culinary magazine-writing, Wallace courts the ire of *Gourmet* magazine's editors and paying readers by foregrounding the potential mass torture of lobsters at the famed Maine Lobster Festival:

Tourism and lobster are the midcoast region's two main industries, and they're both warm-weather enterprises, and the Maine Lobster Festival represents less an intersection of the

---

<sup>228</sup> Benjamin Kunkel, 'Sense and Saleability: How Amazon Changed the Way We Read', <https://www.bookforum.com/print/2804/how-amazon-changed-the-way-we-read-24727>, Dec/Jan/Feb 2022 (accessed 13/12/2021).

industries than a deliberate collusion, joyful and lucrative and loud.<sup>229</sup>

Spanning the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Global Financial Crisis, Wallace's tragically short life (1962-2008) coincided with what historians may end up regarding as the high-water mark of humanity's obsession with marketing. Wallace himself senses the unsustainability of this cultural orientation by describing himself as a 'late-date American'<sup>230</sup>: the Maine Lobster Festival is the embodiment of material exaggeration over ethical substance. The status of lobster as a luxury consumer item, however, is first placed in sociohistorical context:

Up until sometime in the 1800s, lobster was literally low-class food, eaten only by the poor and institutionalised. Even in the harsh penal environment of early America, some colonies had laws against feeding lobsters to inmates more than once a week because it was thought to be cruel and unusual, like making people eat rats. One reason for their low status was how plentiful they were in old New England.<sup>231</sup>

Wallace is acutely concerned with the autonomy of the individual - in this case, the writer - amid the expectations of bosses, shareholders and readers of the culinary magazine which has dispatched him, and who expect to have their preferences flattered rather than critiqued. Complex ethical and lobster-neurological issues aside, Wallace forces his reader to be conscious of what he is *really* doing: namely, making a point of writing what he himself wants to write concerning his experience of the Maine Lobster Festival, irrespective of the social expectations, rewards or punishments which may accompany submission of his dispatch to *Gourmet* magazine (the article in fact attracted a lot of attention from

---

<sup>229</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'Consider the Lobster' (2004), in *Consider the Lobster (And Other Essays)*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 2006), p. 235.

<sup>230</sup> See Ryan Marnane, 'Why's This So Good? David Foster Wallace and the Brilliant "Consider the Lobster"', <https://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/whys-this-so-crazy-good-david-foster-wallace-and-consider-the-lobster/>, 1/8/2017 (accessed 15/12/2021).

<sup>231</sup> Wallace, 'Consider the Lobster', pp. 237-238.

readers, though not all of it positive<sup>232</sup>). Wallace is performing, in short, the very ‘productivity’ which Erich Fromm spent his professional life prophesying and advocating. We are not including this chapter, however, as a mere illustration or proof of Fromm’s concept; the juxtaposition of Fromm, Wallace and the other names to come ought to result in something more than the sum of its parts.

After six pages of background - already jarring for *Gourmet* readers - on the Maine Lobster Festival (‘what [it] really is is a midlevel county fair with a culinary hook’<sup>233</sup>), Wallace announces a total break from ‘authorpreneurial’ convention: ‘A detail so obvious that most recipes don’t even bother to mention it is that each lobster is supposed to be alive when you put it in the kettle.’<sup>234</sup> This is the opposite of playing it safe with customers by seeking to respond to their existing demand, a veritable middle finger to the marketing orientation consciously and unconsciously expected of him:

It appears to me unlikely that many readers of *Gourmet* wish [...] to be queried about the morality of their eating habits in the pages of a culinary monthly. Since, however, the assigned subject of this article is what it was like to attend the 2003 MLF, and thus to spend several days in the midst of a great mass of Americans all eating lobster, and thus to be more or less impelled to think hard about lobster and the experience of buying

---

<sup>232</sup> Ryan Marnane’s above-quoted ‘Why’s This So Good? David Foster Wallace and the Brilliant “Consider the Lobster”’ (<https://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/whys-this-so-crazy-good-david-foster-wallace-and-consider-the-lobster/>) cleverly covers the article’s reception:

This is all to say that what makes ‘Consider the Lobster’ so good is not merely Wallace’s detailing of the various ways in which lobsters are euphemistically “prepared” for cooking — e.g., ‘Some cooks’ practice is to drive a sharp heavy knife point-first into a spot just above the midpoint between the lobster’s eyestalks’ — nor is it his erudite display of ‘comparative neuroanatomy’ and ‘hard core philosophy’ that is required to discuss behaviors associated with pain and suffering, but rather his propensity to lure readers of *Gourmet* into the depths of self-investigative moral inquiry with him. An undertaking many readers of *Gourmet*, as we shall soon see, would not have otherwise agreed to at the outset of reading. ‘What were you thinking when you published that lobster story?’ writes in one distressed reader, continuing, ‘Do you think I read your magazine so you can make me feel uncomfortable about the food I eat? What are you going to scare me away from eating next? Is this your job and the purpose of your magazine?’

<sup>233</sup> Wallace, ‘Consider the Lobster’, pp. 239-240.

<sup>234</sup> Wallace, ‘Consider the Lobster’, p. 242.

and eating lobster, it turns out that there is no honest way to avoid certain moral questions.<sup>235</sup>

Wallace is questioning the wisdom of the entire system of modern industrial capitalist exchange here, a sociological and social-psychological framework which encourages readers indignantly to expect a certain type of more or less dishonest 'fare' in the pages of *Gourmet* magazine. As he longs instead for a non-existent republic of letters, Wallace realises that the only place he can realistically hope to communicate with the readers of *Gourmet* magazine is, if he is lucky enough still to be published there despite flouting all the reigning conventions, in the pages of *Gourmet* magazine itself:

Given this article's venue and my own lack of culinary sophistication, I'm curious about whether the reader can identify with any of these reactions and acknowledgments and discomforts. I'm also concerned not to come off as shrill or preachy when what I really am is more like confused. [...] For those *Gourmet* readers who enjoy well-prepared and well-presented meals involving beef, veal, lamb, pork, chicken, lobster etc.: Do you think much about the (possible) moral status and (probable) suffering of the animals involved? If you do, what ethical convictions have you worked out that permit you not just to eat but to savour and enjoy flesh-based viands (since of course refined *enjoyment*, rather than mere ingestion, is the whole point of gastronomy)? If, on the other hand, you'll have no truck with confusions or convictions and regard stuff like the previous paragraph as just so much fatuous navel-gazing, what makes it feel truly okay, inside, to just dismiss the whole thing out of hand? That is, is your refusal to think about any of this the product of actual thought, or is it just that you don't want to think about it? And if the latter, then why not? Do you ever think, even idly, about the possible reasons for your reluctance to think about it? I am not trying to bait anyone here - I'm genuinely curious. After all, isn't being extra aware and attentive and thoughtful about one's food and its overall context part of what distinguishes a real gourmet? Or is all the gourmet's extra

---

<sup>235</sup> Wallace, 'Consider the Lobster', pp. 246-247.

attention and sensibility just supposed to be sensuous? Is it really all just a matter of taste and presentation?<sup>236</sup>

The provocative character of Wallace's 'productive' orientation in 'Consider the Lobster', *Infinite Jest* and elsewhere in his curtailed literary career is well echoed by that slightly younger *wunderkind* of American letters, Benjamin Kunkel (1972-), with whom this short chapter began: as with Wallace, Kunkel's injunction to honest 'productivity' applies far beyond gastronomy and other hedonistic pursuits, and extends to humanistic education in general:

Why should students turn to literature departments to encounter the sort of books and TV shows they already consume? You don't need to be a rocket scientist—a rock climber will do—to see that the attraction of specialized knowledge lies in the promise of new capacities, not the ratification of old habits. The apex of English Lit, as a field that both enlisted undergrads and influenced the readerly itineraries of nonstudents, must have occurred around 1970, when the number of English majors in the land had quadrupled since the late '40s. Probably the central text of this period, after *Hamlet*, was *Paradise Lost*, a long and elaborate blank-verse epic, full of recondite allusions and fiendish syntax, which Milton had hoped might 'fit audience find, though few'. Curiously, this was the route to wide appeal in the postwar.

Of course the social conditions underlying the heyday of the English major can't be repeated. All the same, aging former lit majors will recall Wordsworth's admonition that every great writer 'must create the taste by which he is to be enjoyed'. The same goes for literary scholarship, which does better to create new appetites than to cater to existing diets. To be sure, the formation and education of taste is a harder and more fraught exercise than the mere reflection of popular desires. The thing is, it may also, paradoxically, stand a better chance of popularity.<sup>237</sup>

Art and literature, in other words, offer a potential Frommian antidote to the hedonism and preference-relativism of modern market societies.

---

<sup>236</sup> Wallace, 'Consider the Lobster', pp. 253-254.

<sup>237</sup> Kunkel, 'Sense and Saleability'.

Aesthetic experience is a socially mediated liberation from this groupthink, as the 20th-century dystopian canon from Zamyatin to Huxley and Orwell variously shows, and as contemporary scholars like Patrick Fessenbecker, Michael Clune and Dominic McIver Lopes are also busy explaining:

A commitment to democratic equality has made it difficult to espouse hierarchies in any form: judging one work of art to be worse than another—much less judging one person's capacity for judgment to be worse than another's—has seemed to many a violation of the moral ideal of fundamental equality. But this is a mistake, Clune argues: aesthetic experience isn't the product of a capacity for disinterested pleasure shared universally, as Immanuel Kant thought. David Hume's account is better: aesthetic experience is the result of a learned sensitivity. It's not that some are born able to judge art while others are not; it's that some receive an education others don't. [...] Second and more perniciously, a major impact of capitalist social life is the widespread attitude that there are no qualitative differences between preferences. [...] This challenge thus requires stepping back from literary studies and considering what Lopes calls 'the primitive question' of aesthetics: What place should beauty have in our lives? And answering the primitive question depends on the normative structure of human agency.

If Clune's target is the way a commitment to equality warps our thinking about value, Lopes's nemesis is the assumption that value must connect in some way to pleasure. [...] On 'the network theory', Lopes's alternative to the hedonic theory, [...] normativity doesn't depend on serotonin-scented motivational psychology. [...] Lopes suggests that some aesthetic practices might be 'hubs', education which opens a large number of doors into other practices where many different aesthetic personalities might find expression. To that extent, institutions might have an interest in cultivating the reading of literature as opposed to the subtleties of lawn care.<sup>238</sup>

---

<sup>238</sup> Patrick Fessenbecker, 'Do the Humanities Need Experts or Sceptics?', <https://www.publicbooks.org/do-the-humanities-need-experts-or-skeptics/>, 14/12/2021 (accessed 17/12/2021).

By pursuing publication in *Gourmet* magazine, Wallace is seeking not to weaponise literature for extraneous purposes, but rather to perform the countercultural, psychoanalytic, antitotalitarian function proper to literature itself. This is not at all to say that experts in other fields cannot (or indeed do not) perform this same critical function, as Louis Menand has also recently stressed<sup>239</sup>; it is simply to affirm Fessenbecker's conclusion, namely that 'the idea that literature professors [like Wallace] are basically just experts in one moderately reliable way of living with beauty is a humbler view of the discipline than it has sometimes claimed for itself. But it is not nothing.'<sup>240</sup> 'Productive' intellectuals will all operate somewhere on a spectrum between dilettantism and pedantry; that Fromm flirted with both ends of this spectrum ought not to disqualify him from membership of the club. Like Fromm, Wallace understood that the generalism inherent in humanities education (as distinct from 'philological training') necessarily transcends the tenured bounds of the modern research university; indeed, such critique is a vital 'antibody' within the broader socioeconomic system of specialisation that makes the fruits of modernity possible. Menand explains:

It's not an accident or a misfortune that great-books pedagogy is an antibody in the 'knowledge factory' of the research university. [...] It was *intended* as an antibody. The disciplinary structure of the modern university came first; the great-books courses came after. As Montás says, 'The practice of liberal education, especially in the context of a research university, is pointedly countercultural.'

[...] Virtually every course at an élite school like Columbia, from poetry to physics, is part of a liberal education. 'Liberal' just means free and disinterested. It means that inquiry is pursued without fear or favor, regardless of the outcome and whatever the field of study. Universities exist to protect that freedom. [...] Great-books courses, [however], tend to be taught against the grain of academic disciplinary paradigms. This has obvious educational value. Many students who take a great-books-type course enjoy encountering famous texts and seeing that the questions they raise are often relevant to their other coursework.

---

<sup>239</sup> Louis Menand, 'What's So Great About Great-Books Courses?', <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/whats-so-great-about-great-books-courses-roosevelt-montas-rescuing-socrates>, 13/12/2021 (accessed 17/12/2021)

<sup>240</sup> Fessenbecker, 'Do the Humanities Need Experts or Sceptics?'

And some students experience a kind of intellectual awakening, which can be inspiring and even transformational. For students who are motivated—and motivation is half of learning—these courses really work. [...] Undergraduate teachers, whatever their training, can play a role as a transitional parent figure, someone students can talk to who is not privy to their personal or social lives, someone who will let them have the keys to the car no questions asked. And students profit from learning how universities operate and arguing about what college is for. It opens up the experience for them, gives the system some transparency and the students some agency.<sup>241</sup>

Wallace sought to offer a similar form of ‘agency’ - whether they asked for it or not - to the readers of *Gourmet* magazine. In doing so, however, he illustrated that the critical spirit is effete without relevant scientific jargon (in this case concerning the neurobiology of lobsters); metawaffle about ‘self-knowledge’ may be necessary to explain the value of the humanities, but it is not sufficient, as Menand’s recent takedown of Roosevelt Montás and Arnold Weinstein reminds us:

What humanists should be teaching, Montás and Weinstein believe, is self-knowledge. To ‘know thyself’ is the proper goal. Art and literature, as Weinstein puts it, ‘are intended for personal use, not in the self-help sense but as mirrors, as entryways into who we ourselves are or might be.’ Montás says, ‘A teacher in the humanities can give students no greater gift than the revelation of the self as a primary object of lifelong investigation.’ You don’t need research to learn this. Research is irrelevant. You just need some great books and a charismatic instructor.

[...] ‘The value of the thing,’ Montás explains, about liberal education, ‘cannot be extracted and delivered apart from the experience of the thing.’ Literature’s bottom line, Weinstein says, is that it has no bottom line. It all sounds a lot like ‘Trust us. We can’t explain it, but we know what we’re doing.’

[...] For Montás and Weinstein, science is the enemy of ethical insight and self-knowledge. Science instrumentalizes, it quantifies, it reduces life to elements that are, well, effable. Weinstein can see that students might think that science courses

---

<sup>241</sup> Menand, ‘What’s So Great About Great-Books Courses?’

are useful for a successful career, but he thinks that 'success' is just another false idol. He writes, 'One has read a great deal about "quants" being gobbled up by investment firms, hired on the strength of their mathematical prowess, hence likely to add to bottom lines. What actually does a bottom line mean? Is anyone asking about judgment? Does any university or graduate school transcript even whisper anything about judgment? Values? Priorities? Ethics?'

Weinstein won't even call what students learn in science courses 'knowledge'. He calls it 'information', which he thinks has nothing to do with how one ought to live. 'Life is more than reason or data,' he tells us, 'and literature schools us in a different set of affairs, the affairs of heart and soul that have little truck with information as such.' [...] 'Today, the heirs to Descartes's project are perhaps most visible in Silicon Valley,' Montás says, 'but the ethic that informs his approach is pervasive in the broader culture, including the culture of the university.' What did Descartes write that set us on the road to Facebook? He wrote that scientific knowledge can lead to medical discoveries that improve health and prolong life. Montás calls this proposition 'Faustian'.

[...] Humanists cannot win a war against science. They should not be fighting a war against science. They should be defending their role in the knowledge business, not standing aloof in the name of unspecified and unspecifiable higher things. [...] Art and literature have cognitive value. They are records of the ways human beings have made sense of experience. They tell us something about the world. But they are not privileged records. A class in social psychology can be as revelatory and inspiring as a class on the novel. The idea that students develop a greater capacity for empathy by reading books in literature classes about people who never existed than they can by taking classes in fields that study actual human behavior does not make a lot of sense. [...] Universities are in this world, and education is about empowering people to deal with things as they are. Students at places like Brown and Columbia want to make the world a better place, and they can see, as Descartes saw, that science can provide tools to do this. [...] Isn't it a little arrogant for humanists to presume that economics professors and life-science professors and computer-science professors don't care

about their students' personal development? The humanities do not have a monopoly on moral insight.<sup>242</sup>

Reading Wallace after three months of Fromm-related discovery, one senses that the author of 'Consider the Lobster' found the sweetspot: the 'self-knowledge' that humanists might prize is not to be enjoyed independent of the world in which the individual human being finds herself. The modern dangers of instrumental rationality and a 'marketing orientation' may culminate and multiply in such lowbrow for-profit publications as *Gourmet* magazine, but it is not wrong to want to improve such fora, just as it is not wrong for spiritual leaders everywhere to wish to come together to solve such real-world problems as looming environmental catastrophe. The generalist humanities - as distinct from scientific 'philology' or 'cultural studies' on the one hand, and human and social sciences on the other - are there to remind specialists trained in every academic discipline (as well as workers and citizens of all backgrounds) that their lives have a meaning which they themselves are free to define and enjoy - if only they can be educated for such freedom by having their existing preferences challenged.

---

<sup>242</sup> Menand, 'What's So Great About Great-Books Courses?'

## 12. Luxemburg: Democratic Heart

*There is a strong case for saying that Hannah Arendt [‘I can either study philosophy or I can drown myself’] wrote best as a journalist. The essays in her collection Men in Dark Times should be first port of call for anyone wanting to know more about, say, Rosa Luxemburg or Walter Benjamin or Bertolt Brecht. [...] Notoriously, Arendt didn’t see the devil in Eichmann. What she saw was a pinched bureaucrat out of a Kafka nightmare. [...] He’d not broken any laws — he’d actually been following the law when he dispatched Jews to the death camps. To be sure, the ‘I was only obeying orders’ defence can’t but sound weaselly. But you have to be mighty certain that you yourself would have been willing to disobey orders before you condemn the cowardly. [...] Sixty years on, [Arendt’s] polemical posturing [about Jewish complicity in the Holocaust] sounds as silly as ever — especially to anyone who’s read Arendt’s earlier book, The Origins of Totalitarianism, in which she rightly argues that a reign of terror like that of the Nazis renders ‘decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal’. [...] There are no masses, indifferent or otherwise. There are only people, and at any one time vanishingly few of them will be heroes. It is a measure of Arendt’s own stunted moral imagination that she never grasped this point. [...] It behooves anyone who admires Arendt for her courage to acknowledge [...] that the way she lived her life will always be more instructive than the ideas she deduced from it.<sup>243</sup>*

Christopher Bray

If one 20th-century German-speaking author has achieved even more prominence in the contemporary Anglosphere than Erich Fromm, then

---

<sup>243</sup> Christopher Bray, ‘Lessons from Life: How the Facts of Hannah Arendt’s Life Read like Fiction’, <https://thecritic.co.uk/issues/october-2021/lessons-from-life/>, October 2021 (accessed 17/12/2021).

that author is Hannah Arendt, and deservedly so: Arendt's work on loneliness and totalitarianism is perhaps even closer to the post-Trump and post-2020 pandemic Zeitgeist than Fromm's own work on alienation. Arendt scholar Samantha Rose Hill beautifully lays bare the stakes; before we turn to the criminally underread Rosa Luxemburg, it is worth quoting Hill on Arendt at some length:

The elements of totalitarianism were numerous, but in loneliness [Arendt] found the essence of totalitarian government, and the common ground of terror. Why loneliness is not obvious. Arendt's answer was: because loneliness radically cuts people off from human connection. [...] When we experience loneliness, we lose the ability to experience anything else; and, in loneliness, we are unable to make new beginnings. [...] In order to illustrate why loneliness is the essence of totalitarianism and the common ground of terror, Arendt distinguished isolation from loneliness, and loneliness from solitude. Isolation, she argued, is sometimes necessary for creative activity. Even the mere reading of a book, she says, requires some degree of isolation. One must intentionally turn away from the world to make space for the experience of solitude but, once alone, one is always able to turn back. [...] Totalitarian movements use ideology to isolate individuals. [...] But in order to make individuals susceptible to ideology, you must first ruin their relationship to themselves and others by making them sceptical and cynical, so that they can no longer rely upon their own judgment. [...] Organised loneliness, bred from ideology, leads to tyrannical thought, and destroys a person's ability to distinguish between fact and fiction – to make judgments. In loneliness, one is unable to carry on a conversation with oneself, because one's ability to think is compromised. Ideological thinking turns us away from the world of lived experience, starves the imagination, denies plurality, and destroys the space between men that allows them to relate to one another in meaningful ways. And once ideological thinking has taken root, experience and reality no longer bear upon thinking. Instead, experience conforms to ideology in thinking. Which is why when Arendt talks about loneliness, she is not just talking about the affective experience of loneliness: she is talking about a way of thinking. Loneliness arises when thought is divorced from reality. We think from experience, and when we no

longer have new experiences in the world to think from, we lose the standards of thought that guide us in thinking about the world.

[...] Arendt argues that the underlying fear that attracts one to ideology is the fear of self-contradiction. This fear of self-contradiction is why thinking itself is dangerous – because thinking has the power to uproot all of our beliefs and opinions about the world. Thinking can unsettle our faith, our beliefs, our sense of self-knowledge. Thinking can strip away everything that we hold dear, rely upon, take for granted day-to-day. Thinking has the power to make us come undone. [...] Put very simply: people who subscribe to ideology have thoughts, but they are incapable of thinking for themselves. And it is this inability to think, to keep one's self company, to make meaning from one's experiences in the world, that makes them lonely. [...] Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness is felt most sharply in the company of others. [...] And this is what Arendt was stripped of when she lost the space to be alone with herself. 'What makes loneliness so unbearable,' she said 'is the loss of one's own self which can be realised in solitude.'

In solitude, one is able to keep oneself company, to engage in a conversation with oneself. In solitude, one doesn't lose contact with the world, because the world of experience is ever-present in our thinking. To quote Arendt, quoting Cicero: 'Never is a man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself.' This is what ideological thinking and tyrannical thinking destroy – our ability to think with and for ourselves. This is the root of organised loneliness.<sup>244</sup>

The life of Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) naturally precedes most of the 20th-century dramas to which the 1906-born Arendt (and the 1900-born Fromm) were witness; nevertheless, her observations of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution (in the context of her own doomed socialist activism in wartime Germany) situate her near the beginning of Fromm's own intellectual journey. Luxemburg's *Geburtsfehler der russischen Revolution* (1918) is a valuable document in part because the author did not live to see her diagnosed 'birth defects' come to full 20th-century fruition in the form of Stalinist terror, a second brutal world war and a

---

<sup>244</sup> Samantha Rose Hill, 'Where Loneliness Can Lead', <https://aeon.co/essays/for-hannah-arendt-totalitarianism-is-rooted-in-loneliness>, 16 October 2020 (accessed 17/12/2021).

long Cold War characterised by bitter ideological standoff. It is important to make clear to contemporary readers sceptical of her socialist reputation that Luxemburg was in fact much closer to Churchill than Ceaușescu:

It is clear that every democratic institution has its limitations and shortcomings, just as all human institutions do. But the cure which Lenin and Trotsky propose - a total bypass of democracy - is worse than the disease [of bourgeois democracy] itself. It blocks up the very living source by which the native inadequacies of social institutions can be supplemented, namely the active, unimpeded and energetic political engagement of the broadest possible number of citizens.<sup>245</sup>

Such a political culture is 'unthinkable', Luxemburg continues, without a free press and freedom of association; Lenin's claim that 'the bourgeois state is a tool designed to oppress the working class' is not as strong as Luxemburg's well-known counter-claim: 'A freedom limited to members of the government or to members of a single Party - however numerous they may be - is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and everywhere the freedom to think differently.'<sup>246</sup>

Luxemburg's proto-Frommian agenda is cultural, and democracy is a necessary instrument: 'The practice of socialism requires a thoroughgoing spiritual shift among populations degraded by centuries of bourgeois class dominance,' she begins, before taking Lenin to task for his 'dictatorial violence', 'draconian punishments' and 'rule by fear':

The only path to a rebirth [of the socialist ideal] is the school of public life itself, the unhindered democratic exchange of opinion. [...] The basic problem with the thought of Lenin and Trotsky lies, as with Kautsky, in their false dichotomy between dictatorship and democracy. [...] Kautsky] prefers democracy, namely bourgeois democracy, [...] while] Lenin and Trotsky opt for dictatorship, and specifically for an aristocratic dictatorship of a

---

<sup>245</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, 'Geburtsfehler der russischen Revolution' (1918), in Bruno Kern (ed.), *Mensch sein ist vor allem die Hauptsache: Gedanken einer Revolutionärin*, (Wiesbaden: Marixverlag, 2019), p. 127.

<sup>246</sup> Luxemburg, 'Geburtsfehler der russischen Revolution', pp. 127-128.

chosen few. Both these poles are equally remote from true socialist politics.<sup>247</sup>

Luxemburg's democratic socialist humanism, then, is exactly halfway between *laissez-faire* economic and cultural policies, which compound the pathologies of the disadvantaged, and the even more terrifying Leninist alternative: an exact middle ground must be found between 'bourgeois democracy' on the one hand (Dewey's 'shadow cast on society by big business') and rule by Communist clique on the other. To this end, Luxemburg envisages a 'dictatorship' composed of an entire society and enforced via 'unhindered democratic participation'.<sup>248</sup>

Such arrangements naturally require total emancipation from what Fromm will describe twenty years later as the 'authoritarian character'; Luxemburg's idyll is impossible without the broadest possible army of productively oriented autonomous citizens:

It is our business constantly to reveal the rotten core of social injustice and unfreedom beneath the sweet skin of formal liberty and equality [offered by bourgeois democracy to the bourgeoisie], not in order to throw this skin away, but to encourage the working class to dream beyond the skin and strive for political power so that it can fill the core with social solidarity. It should be the goal of the proletariat to use its power to establish socialist democracy at the expense of bourgeois democracy, not to abolish democracy *tout court*. Socialist democracy, alas, does not begin in the promised land, with the infrastructure of a socialist society already in place, as a Christmas present for the deserving masses. [...] The prior task of democratic socialism is to undermine the undue dominance of one class of people over another and secure the ground for itself.

This can begin when a socialist party wins an election. It may end in a 'dictatorship of the proletariat', but such dictatorship means only an insistence on a certain view of democracy, not an abolition of the democratic principle. It requires energetic and resolute interventions in the legal and economic structure of bourgeois society, without which the [spiritual] revolution at the heart of the socialist idea can never be realised. Such a

---

<sup>247</sup> Luxemburg, 'Geburtsfehler der russischen Revolution', p. 128.

<sup>248</sup> Luxemburg, 'Geburtsfehler der russischen Revolution', p. 129.

‘dictatorship’ must be the work of a people as a whole, not a small cohort of appointed leaders; it must, in other words, advance in step with the active participation of the masses.<sup>249</sup>

The bind for socialist thinkers like Luxemburg and Fromm is that large numbers of people may, for good sociological reasons, be unaware of their own true interests; the democratic system may be a potential means of increasing mass awareness of the social-psychological stresses and injustices of post-industrial modernity (i.e. via the activism of socialist political parties), but it is also, in its ‘bourgeois’ guises, a means of perpetuating them. Why trust that the democratic system in our fallen world can ever truly correct itself from within for mass humanism? An analogy may be drawn here with the work of a critic like George Steiner, for whom faith in the democratic principle must withstand the very real possibility of abuse:

‘The spheres of Auschwitz-Birkenau and of the Beethoven recital, of the torture-cellar and the great library, were contiguous in space and time,’ Steiner wrote in 1984. ‘Men could come home from their day’s butchery and falsehood to weep over Rilke or play Schubert.’

Criticism, Steiner demanded, must mind this gap. It cannot take for granted—as so many past generations had—that the arts and humanities automatically humanize. Indeed, critics must consider how high culture was implicated in the wars of the twentieth century and their civilian horrors, and not only by recalling the conspicuous bigots and militarists among the ranks of the writers, artists, and professors. Perhaps, Steiner speculated, spilling out our emotional lives on fictional people, paintings of haystacks, and moody sonatas can diminish our moral reserves, making us deaf to the cry of the man in the street—or to the sight of women and children being loaded into cattle cars. ‘There may be a covert, betraying link,’ Steiner suggested in the 1965 lecture, ‘between the cultivation of aesthetic response and the potential for personal inhumanity.’

There is an obvious tension between the two qualities of Steiner’s criticism that I have named. On the one hand, Steiner made one of the twentieth century’s most impassioned cases for

---

<sup>249</sup> Luxemburg, ‘Geburtsfehler der russischen Revolution’, pp. 99-100.

the deepening, quickening, *humanizing* benefits of encountering literature and the arts, while, on the other, he marshalled one of the postwar years' most devastating critiques of the old faith in humanistic education. Steiner was well aware of this paradox. Indeed, he embraced it. For its two sides spoke to the need for the right kind of critic, one who acknowledged the full range of human impulses and emotions—sublime and barbaric—and who could thereby speak words of both invitation and warning to his fellow readers.<sup>250</sup>

Such optimism that literature - or indeed democracy - can nevertheless serve the humanist cause is precisely what a socialist intellectual must *foster*; scientific analyses of social phenomena and philosophical theorising *about* socialism will never actually replace the business of *incarnation*:

To 'wager' on meaning, Steiner argued, is to believe in the possibility that art 'incarnates' meaning, through which a great mystery (thus the reference to the Eucharist) is conveyed by the media of language, brush strokes, scripts, and musical scores. [...] He meant to testify to the irreducibility, the inexhaustibility, the fullness of great art. 'Above all,' he counsels in the 1985 lecture 'Real Presences', 'the meaning striven towards will never be one which exegesis, commentary, translation, paraphrase, psychoanalytic or sociological decoding, can ever exhaust, can ever define as total. Only weak poems can be exhaustively interpreted or understood.' This was Steiner's *critical* version of what the historian of ideas Arthur O. Lovejoy called 'the principle of plenitude', the notion that 'the extent and abundance of the creation must be as great as the possibility of existence and commensurate with the productive capacity of a perfect and inexhaustible Source, and that the world is better, the more things it contains.' [...] Even when done well, the work of the critic is never done.<sup>251</sup>

---

<sup>250</sup> Richard Hughes Gibson, 'The Critic's Critic: George Steiner and the Art of Hopeful Failure', <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/authenticity/articles/the-critics-critic>, Fall 2021 (accessed 21/12/2021)

<sup>251</sup> Gibson, 'The Critic's Critic'.

Rosa Luxemburg may be pigeonholed as an activist by intellectual historians (much as Erich Fromm has been circumscribed as a psychoanalyst), but in both authors there is something more going on, namely an attempt to *embody* the revolutionary content of socialist politics. Without surrendering her critical faculties to the charisma of 'thought leaders' like Luxemburg and Fromm, the lay reader can nevertheless find the very nourishment in them that will feed the socialist revolution they variously describe and support. This is the very opposite of loneliness, and the opposite of the Leninism that Fromm himself followed Luxemburg in denouncing:

Many democratic socialists and socialist revolutionaries recognised the danger in Lenin's concept, but none saw it as clearly as Rosa Luxemburg. She warned that [socialism] faced a choice between democracy and bureaucracy; developments in Russia have shown just how right she was. [...] Luxemburg understood that a centralised bureaucratic system in which an elite rules on behalf of workers would necessarily degenerate into a system where the [Party] ruled *over* them. [...] Marx never said (as he is often accused of doing) that he could predict future events with any certainty. He was always an 'alternativist'. [...] It was Luxemburg, one of Marx's great readers, who formulated the 'alternative' facing humanity in our century: socialism or barbarism.<sup>252</sup>

---

<sup>252</sup> Erich Fromm, *Gesamtausgabe*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999), vol. II, p. 264, vol. IV, p. 168, vol. V, p. 70. This is a retranslated mashup of Fromm references to Luxemburg from *The Sane Society* (1955), *Marx's Concept of Man* (1961) and *The Heart of Man* (1964).

### 13. Sábato: Second Liberations

*Everything I've written - the novels and the essays - concerns the crisis facing contemporary human beings. I have taken a visceral part in this crisis because I lived for a time at the cutting edge of science. I studied in Paris and returned to Argentina, where I continued my teaching and research on nuclear physics, passing on Einstein's theories to new generations of doctoral students. [...] I was terrified, philosophically speaking, by [Hiroshima]; that was when I began to understand that physics was going to take over the world, and that technology was going to decimate us. It started in the wake of the Renaissance with a certain positivistic view of science which set us off on a new Promethean adventure: conquest - of the world, the world of things, the natural world, the external world. There was a paradoxical and tragic price attached to this [dream]: man conquered the world of things but placed his soul in grave danger by turning himself into an object. In the most advanced civilisations - materially and technically at least - [...] young people don't clamour for higher salaries; beyond a certain point the crisis is spiritual rather than economic. [...] We need a response to the idolatry of technology. The more I thought about it, the more I realised that, of all human spiritual activities, art is the only one which allows the individual not just to express this total 20th-century existential crisis, but also - perhaps - to hope for salvation beyond it. The whole human being goes into art; [...] the novel in particular allows for both expression of the crisis and attempts at salvation from it. I reached this conclusion fairly quite early on [after 1945], but it has crystallised over the years. In fact I believe it more and more strongly.<sup>253</sup>*

Ernesto Sábato (1977)

---

<sup>253</sup> Ernesto Sábato, 'La crisis del hombre de hoy' (1977), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8ZZSPJ60TE>, 9/5/2011 (accessed 24/12/2021).

One could probably do Ernesto Sábato the service of reproducing the entire untranslated 16-page main text of his *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina* in English here, but we will limit ourselves to selecting highlights from the 1979 publication, by the Venezuelan Embassy in Buenos Aires, of Sábato's 1975 address in Caracas. The above quotation from Sábato's 1977 appearance on Spanish television allows us to understand what he means when he says in his throat-clearing remarks to his Venezuelan audience that 'Latin America is passing through what we should call its second liberation, one which I believe will come from books'<sup>254</sup>: the Bolivarian *libertadores* may have achieved a kind of pre-industrial victory for the continent, but now Latin America faces the same crisis of modernity as everyone else. A certain cultural self-confidence - of the kind to be provided by the Biblioteca Ayacucho project<sup>255</sup> - will be needed to avoid the modern authoritarian trap:

Generally, when books are mentioned by politicians and economists who hold the destiny of nations in their hands, they are only really regarded as an honourable adornment for a nation or generation, even when the leaders in question are themselves good readers. With brave exceptions, such leaders consider that books and culture, strictly defined, carry much less weight than economic and geopolitical factors. I think, as many others also do, that this is far from true. [...] I believe that books will need to be more than one background aspect among others in the coming second liberation; they will need to be the very foundation of it.<sup>256</sup>

Far from a 'second liberation', Sábato is obviously speaking on the cusp of a low-water-mark in the history of his native Argentina: a military junta will overrun the country in 1976 and make thousands of its own citizens 'disappear' (Sábato himself will play a major role in subsequent national

---

<sup>254</sup> Ernesto Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, (Buenos Aires: Publicaciones de la Embajada de Venezuela, 1979), pp. 14-15.

<sup>255</sup> See Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, p. 14. The Biblioteca Ayacucho project remains active: [https://www.clacso.org.ar/biblioteca\\_ayacucho/](https://www.clacso.org.ar/biblioteca_ayacucho/) (accessed 23/12/2021).

<sup>256</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, pp. 14-15.

reconciliation projects<sup>257</sup>). The Venezuelan government of Carlos Andrés Pérez 1922-2010), which Sábato thanks for inviting him in 1975, may have been hostile to the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, but the continent-wide 'liberation' Sábato envisages (indeed he regards Latin America from Los Angeles to Cape Horn as a single 'nation') could not be said to have been achieved, either in the 1970s or since. At least Sábato's 'dream' of liberation, traceable to the first generation of *Libertadores*, remains clear and alive:

Didn't the great works of European romanticism and Enlightenment thought provide the foundation for our first liberation? This shows that we should not completely reject European influence in the name of our own uniqueness; the path towards any liberation worth having passes via the liberation of everyone else. We have reached adulthood; let us leave our inferiority complexes behind us. It is precisely because we are now capable of dialogue on an even footing with Europe that we can celebrate the cultural heritage we received from her and recognise the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman sources of this culture. We are not only inheritors of this culture but perhaps even potential saviours of it in a time of crisis for the Old World. This is a profound crisis of humanism generally; [...] it seems clear that countries at the periphery of the technocratic bourgeois centre - the nucleus of cultural modernity - are those that can do most to rescue it.<sup>258</sup>

Sábato hoped that the Biblioteca Ayacucho could become a 'living reserve' rather than a 'dead library', an expression of 'the dialectic of culture, which is novelty within tradition'<sup>259</sup>; this means a broad acceptance of Spanish and Portuguese imperial culture - within which meaningful critique, rupture and innovation is possible - rather than a total woke amputation:

---

<sup>257</sup> Sábato presided over the commission which drafted *Nunca más: Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la desaparición de personas* (1984). Although the report is known informally as the *Informe Sábato*, it is worth stressing that Sábato himself, driven by the kind of messianic cultural optimism on display in his 1975 Caracas speech, underestimated the threat of the junta in its early days.

<sup>258</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>259</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, p. 18.

We Latin Americans are something new but also the result of something centuries old. [...] When the first chronicler of the Indias set foot on this land and wrote the word *cielo* or *montaña*, he was inaugurating Latin American literature as a novel hue of the great Spanish literary tradition. Neither the sky nor the mountains were those of his native land; even words like *nostalgia*, *mujer* and *soledad* acquired new meanings. This semantic ambiguity, proper to life itself, represents the true beginning of Latin American literature, a birth midwived by Spaniards. [...] The dark shadow of the *Conquista*, the terrible catastrophe it wrought for the great indigenous cultures and civilisations of the continent, is much evoked, but this immense phenomenon is infinitely more complex [than it seems]: we should at least pause for thought before the fact that two of the greatest Spanish-language poets of all time - Rubén Darío and César Vallejo - were of *mestizo* origin. Far from expressing mere resentment at the tragedy [of brutal first contact], these voices sang admirably of Spain in their day. Recognition of the profound Spanish imprint and an ability to value ourselves as a hybrid continent are vital features of any cultural maturity to which we could meaningfully hope to aspire.<sup>260</sup>

Sábato uses the metaphor of an orchestra<sup>261</sup> to describe the harmony without uniformity which ought to reign within and among Latin American countries:

This [orchestral] unity should be our aspiration for Latin America, not the abstract identity of Enlightenment rationalism, which tends to refer to Man with a capital M instead of individual human

---

<sup>260</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>261</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, p. 20. The dedicatee of this book, Maria Kolesnikova, offers her own Frommian orchestra metaphors in her 2017 TED-Talk 'Orchestr: Eto My?!', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYhngREKNcA> (accessed 22/12/2021):

Social change affects orchestras, but orchestras can also be active participants in this change. In our city of Minsk, for example, orchestras and their musicians have played an important role in the shift in consciousness in recent years - through public appearances etc. - helping us to understand that we each have a voice in this society. By participating in an orchestra, we also enjoy a direct experience of voluntary and passionate service of a common purpose greater than anything we can reach on our own: we create beauty not only for ourselves, but also for a large audience beyond ourselves.

beings. These small-p people are the real ones, the only ones we owe care. When certain ideologues start talking about Humanism in capital letters, there is genuine cause for alarm, because we now know it can end in concentration camps and guillotines, the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of real people. Let us render deserved homage to the Enlightenment thought which helped so much in our first liberation, but let us also understand that, in the aftermath of cataclysmic disasters traceable to the abstraction and instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment, our peoples should now strive for integration on a fresh basis. And here I can only evoke one of my great teachers, Don Pedro Henriquez Areña - another illustrious *mestizo* - who not only preached the ideal of the Latin American *magna patria* to others, but embodied in his very personal presence the paradigm of what Latin American unity within diversity could look and feel like.<sup>262</sup>

The goal of the 'Dominican master' - and other pioneers of Latin American 'liberation and integration' like Don Alfonso Reyes - was 'the construction of a new land of justice and liberty'<sup>263</sup> beyond the capitalist and communist poles of the Cold War, both mired by the 1970s in technocratic abstraction. Once again, however, the 'cure' of dictatorship by the few is worse than the disease of imperfect democracy:

America was invented by utopians and poets, by humanists. [...] Often our youth, driven by a fervent idealism, behave as if only an iron dictatorship can lead us to a second liberation. I am not an enemy of blood, for almost nothing of importance has been achieved without it, but I would like to tell these kids, for whom I have profound affection and sympathy, that they need to be careful what they wish for: we all know that it is right to end injustice, but we need to be careful not to replace it with the injustices that dictatorship by clique inevitably creates; and if one day material poverty should be eradicated for every human being on Earth, and above all in this land which continues to dream of

---

<sup>262</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>263</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, p. 21.

liberty and justice, we have to maintain our guard against spiritual misery.<sup>264</sup>

The results of economic ‘hyperdevelopment’ in the United States are already in: with their ‘overvaluation of material abundance’<sup>265</sup>, these North Americans are in Sábato’s view scarcely better models of happiness than their Soviet ideological rivals:

When I was a student, we fought along the lines of the Russian Revolution. But the sacrifice of entire generations, the filling of the gulags with great men and the madhouses with great spirits, the destruction of these spirits with drugs, all in order to build a society capable of producing cars to match the Americans - none of this has my support. As developing countries we need to keep all this in mind so as to avoid following the path of either the United States or the Soviet Union.<sup>266</sup>

Sábato calls for comprehensive ‘development for a human being who is neither an object nor a number nor a robot’:

I am often told that I want to undo history, but I know that history can never be undone. [...] What I have championed, and what I continue to support, is the idea that we in Latin America should heed tragic experiences elsewhere of technocratic development gone wrong, of an amoral science and capital in blind thrall to their own logics. What I hope to see in our land is the construction of this community of free individual human beings in just harmony with one another and the world.<sup>267</sup>

The Mexican pivot in Fromm’s biography may have owed much to extraneous circumstances, but it is not unreasonable to see in it an echo of Sábato’s own optimism for Latin America as a space of postmodern humanistic renewal: ‘We have not yet become thoroughly bourgeois countries by European and North American standards; happily, we have conserved a number of attributes and customs that until recently would

---

<sup>264</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, p. 22.

<sup>265</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, p. 23.

<sup>266</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, p. 22.

<sup>267</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, pp. 23-24.

have been dismissed as backward, but which with time will come to be seen as fundamental virtues of a new civilisation.’<sup>268</sup> The Argentine Sábato is thinking of more than maté and tango here (though he has much to say about the latter in his 1963 book *Tango, discusión y clave*); as per the title of his speech, he has *libros* in general in mind as the antidote to ‘the abstract capitalism of the United States on the one hand and the abstract socialism of the Soviet Union on the other’:

We clearly want a new society, one in which we no longer attempt to impose social justice at the cost of individual dignity [or *vice versa*]. Let us try to realise this community of concrete people that philosophers like Martin Buber have imagined, a community of individual human beings. [...] Literature is not alien to this great business; if abstract industrial thought ends up converting us into identical finished articles, the novel has always foregrounded the idiosyncracies of individual character.<sup>269</sup>

Beyond theoretical debates about the *Nouveau roman*, Sábato seeks a resacralisation of ‘profane’ literature for a coming post-Cold War world:

Karl Jaspers considered the Greek tragedians as ‘educators’ of their people, not in a banal scholastic sense, but rather as those responsible for a spiritual and metaphysical ‘leading out’ of Greek youth from the darkness of the Platonic cave of ignorance. Jaspers argues that literature lost this sacred and transcendental mission over the centuries, becoming mere ‘entertainment’ in modern times. I share his view of the power of Greek tragedy, but not the second part: Kafka is more than a match for Sophocles.<sup>270</sup>

By practising and embodying its own continental freedom from mistakes made elsewhere, Latin American literature can feed back into dwindling global supplies of Frommian optimism:

By rescuing the concrete person from darkness at home, we will also help alienated citizens of hyperdeveloped industrial

---

<sup>268</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>269</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, p. 26.

<sup>270</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, p. 27.

civilisations on the verge of collapse abroad. Let us learn how to lend this filial hand to the once powerful nations that gave birth to us, and also to the United States, that nation of skyscrapers and air-conditioning but also of many great artists and writers from whom we can learn. Let us transcend the old resentment deriving from our sense of inferiority.<sup>271</sup>

---

<sup>271</sup> Sábato, *Los libros y su misión en la liberación e integración de la América Latina*, pp. 28-29.

## 14. Sōseki: Right to Laziness

*Thomas Mann's Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man might be seen as a gesture of resistance to the impoverishment of human experience that, along with the [First World] War, seemed an almost unavoidable side effect of modern, rationalized society. Yes, human beings are social beings, and social life needs coordination of actions and distribution of resources. But human beings are not merely social beings. We are not the coldly rational actors of administrative science, nor are we the tireless political agitators every social movement hopes for.*<sup>272</sup>

Eskil Elling

Natsume Sōseki's 1914 address at Tokyo's Gakushuin University, '*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*' ('My Individualism'), begins with an unexpectedly longwinded explanation of the speaker's poor health and constitutional sloth; a speech planned for the spring of 1914 was postponed until 25 November. Sōseki admits that this looming obligation became 'unbearable' over the summer of 1914; right up to the morning of the event itself, Sōseki was still 'gathering his thoughts' in full realisation that he was 'insufficiently prepared' for the task entrusted to him, even as he felt an obligation to assume it: the privileged student cohort of Gakushuin University would go on to wield significant influence in Japan's 20th-century development. The most salient feature of Sōseki's speech from a Frommian standpoint is that it describes (and embodies) his arrival at a biophilic orientation *despite* the lingering feudal social character of Meiji Japan and his own early attachment issues (he was unwanted by his biological parents and adopted in 1868, a year after his birth, before returning to his mother and emotionally distant father at the age of nine; his mother and two eldest brothers died

---

<sup>272</sup> Eskil Elling, 'Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man', <https://thepointmag.com/politics/reflections-of-a-nonpolitical-man/#>, 19/12/2021 (accessed 28/12/2021).

while Sōseki was in his teens<sup>273</sup>). The role of literature in this process of self-liberation for a certain form of productive Frommian ‘individualism’ is the central theme of Sōseki’s talk.

Jay Rubin, the English translator of ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’<sup>274</sup>, reminds readers that Shimizu Ikutarō - the reviewer of Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom* discussed in Chapter 4 - was the first scholar ‘to recognize the importance of ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’ to an understanding of Sōseki’s fiction.’<sup>275</sup> The epochal symbolism of the speech is not lost on Rubin either: Sōseki offers a biophilic solution to the loneliness of post-Meiji Japanese life that is diametrically opposed, for example, to Mishima Yukio’s later fascism and renunciation of modern literature as a path to meaning:

---

<sup>273</sup> Sonia Gojman de Millán and Salvador Millán have written and researched extensively on the relationship between Frommian social character and infant attachment. In a recent discussion paper for the Erich Fromm Study Centre Berlin titled ‘Erich Fromm’s Social Character and John Bowlby’s Attachment Theories: An Integrative Approach for Research’, the Milláns caution against either undervaluing or overvaluing the role of attachment in individual character formation:

Infant attachment is critical [for the development of a productive, biophilic character orientation], both because of its place in initiating pathways of development and because of its connection with so many critical developmental functions - social relatedness, arousal modulation, emotional regulation and curiosity to name just a few.

Because development is cumulative, always building upon itself, early attachment relationships set an initial direction for development. Because individuals seek, select, and react to later experience within the framework of attitudes and expectations forged in attachment relationships, there is a tendency for these early pathways to be followed in a Cascadian manner. Of course, early attachment experiences are *open to change*. Still, they are not discarded. They remain either as factors that promote growth or leave individuals more vulnerable to adversity and developmental challenge. [...] Secure infants will explore when external stress is minimal, seek contact when stress increases, and use that contact (physical or psychological) for reassurance which promotes a return to exploration. In attachment theory, the infant is seen as born into *and* embedded in an organized relationship matrix, from which self emerges.

<sup>274</sup> Following Rubin’s own sage advice, I tackled Sōseki’s Japanese text myself with help from a Japanese friend, though I can only recommend Rubin’s outstanding English version. Rubin himself makes clear, however, that there is no such thing as ‘unsurpassable’ in this sphere:

You can’t depend on the grammar of Japanese to guide you in choosing grammatical constructs in English. You have to translate images, ideas, tone and mood — the most enjoyable and intangible elements of literature — into which translation allows (or forces) you to immerse yourself. The best preparation for the job is to practice writing your own language. (Jay Rubin, in Chris Kosaka, ‘Jay Rubin: An Academic’s Path to Translation’, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2020/08/22/books/jay-rubin-translator/>, 22/8/2020 (accessed 21/1/2022)).

<sup>275</sup> Jay Rubin, ‘Sōseki on Individualism: *Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’, *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 34 no. 1 (Spring 1979), p. 21.

Sōseki delivered his lecture at Gakushuin on 25 November 1914, fifty-six years to the day before the novelist Mishima Yukio, who had attended this school for rich young gentlemen, exhorted the members of Japan's Self-Defense Force to rally in support of the Emperor and, when they failed to respond, committed ritual disembowelment. Sōseki would have been appalled at Mishima's actions, and would certainly have balked at the suggestion that individuals should willingly lay down their lives for the state, but he was undoubtedly very moved when General Nogi Maresuke, one of the foremost military figures of his time and President of Gakushuin from 1907 until his death, committed the same traditional form of suicide following the death of the Emperor Meiji in 1912. Critics have had difficulty explaining exactly how the suicide of General Nogi is related to the suicide of Sōseki's protagonist in *Kokoro* (1914), but it is clear that this traditional display of sincerity and loyalty opened up wellsprings of emotion in Sensei that he had assumed to be long since dried up, thanks to his education in 'this modern age, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egotistical selves.'

[... A picture] of Sōseki's formative years emerged in many of the sketches in *Garasudo no Naka* (serialized during January and February 1915) and in the novel *Michikusa* (June-September 1915), whose protagonist, Kenzo, learns from the ghosts of his past that beneath the 'veneer' of his modern education, he shares more with other people than he had supposed. [...] Finally, however, Kenzo is not comforted by the realization of his collective identity, any more than Daisuke in *Sore kara* (1909) can content himself with rustivating in the cool shadows of his father's feudal heritage or the artist in *Kusamakura* (1906) can linger in the passionless, dehumanized world of oriental aestheticism. [...] Nowhere in his works do we find Sōseki preaching a passive acceptance of the world or holding out the possibility of a saving union with nature. Even where he adopts Zen-like terminology in discussing the function of literature, Sōseki envisions a mystical union of individual minds - the writer's and the reader's - in a successful work of fiction, not - as was the tendency in some Zen-influenced naturalist theory - a union between the author and the natural object of his observation. As a writer, he believed that he was performing a useful social function by creating non-specialist literature that

helped people understand each other in an age when the division of labor had separated them more than ever before. The best comfort men could hope for was a union of separate minds, and if, as *Kōjin* (1912) concludes, perfect bridges can never be built from one mind to another, the only alternative - obliteration of mind (or the 'succession of consciousness, which is life') - was never a real alternative for Soseki, either in his fiction or his life.<sup>276</sup>

As Sonia and Salvador Millán put it, Fromm's healthy modern individual constructs a post-tribal 'relatedness' that 'allows him to feel "at home" and saves him from the experience of complete affective isolation and separateness, which is the basis of severe mental sickness.'<sup>277</sup> Sōseki tells his Gakushuin audience about his lonely struggles to find satisfying employment after finishing his studies in English literature; he 'taught everywhere except primary schools and girls' schools' before extended provincial stints in Matsuyama and Kumamoto.<sup>278</sup> His selection by the Ministry of Education in 1900 for a chance to study in Britain at the age of 33 came as a complete surprise; after balking at an offer to study abroad 'without any purpose, especially the purpose of nation-building', Sōseki eventually realised that 'I had no reason to refuse absolutely, and went to England as ordered. [... But] I wondered if I could achieve anything there.'<sup>279</sup> Sōseki's university education in English language and literature in Tokyo had consisted largely of scolding for poor pronunciation and essay composition: 'The tests contained questions like the dates of Wordsworth's birth and death, the exact contents of Shakespeare's First Folio, and Walter Scott's Complete Works in chronological order.'<sup>280</sup> Sōseki, in short, spent 'three years without understanding what literature was. [...] I went out into the world and

---

<sup>276</sup> Rubin, 'Sōseki on Individualism', pp. 22-24.

<sup>277</sup> Sonia Gojman de Millán and Salvador Millán, 'Erich Fromm's Social Character and John Bowlby's Attachment Theories: An Integrative Approach for Research', Erich Fromm Study Center Berlind (Online Discussion Paper), 19/2/2022, p. 3.

<sup>278</sup> Rubin's 'Sōseki on Individualism: *Watakushi no Kojinshugi*', *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 34 no. 1 (Spring 1979) contains an excellent full English translation of Sōseki's speech, though I have drawn directly, here and below, from the Japanese text available at [https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000148/files/772\\_33100.html](https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000148/files/772_33100.html) (accessed 22/1/2022).

<sup>279</sup> Sōseki, '*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*'.

<sup>280</sup> Sōseki, '*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*'.

began teaching with this [disastrous] attitude.’<sup>281</sup> Coupled with classroom anxieties, a growing dissatisfaction with the philological traditionalism of his education gave way to a sense of missed vocation, an ‘unpleasant, simmering, vague thing lurking unbearably’<sup>282</sup>. Though Sōseki’s time in London (1901-1903) was famously lonely and miserable (‘among English gentlemen I lived in misery, like a poor dog that had strayed among a pack of wolves’<sup>283</sup>), it nevertheless forced him to stare down his professional demons: ‘I felt as though I had to do something on top of being born into the world, but I had no idea what that something was.’<sup>284</sup> Sōseki describes the anxiety which had followed him from graduation in Tokyo to Matsuyama, Kumamoto and on to London, all the way into his mid-thirties, as ‘a fog of loneliness, a quest for a ray of light from somewhere’<sup>285</sup>; somehow, however, he was ‘awakened to a new sense of responsibility’<sup>286</sup> while in London, a sudden realisation that he would have to provide his own flashlight: the only way of saving himself was to build up his own conception of literature instead of aping others. Up to that point he had felt hopelessly condemned to a life as a ‘rootless drifter’ because he had been following a conception of literature which others had defined for him; in London he began to question why he bothered reading at all. The infuriating tendency of turn-of-the-century literary types back home in Japan to parade their superficial knowledge of fashionable Western authors like Bergson and Eucken now appeared as the manifestation of the Frommian marketing mentality it was: ‘Our era rewards such namedropping and virtue-signalling.’<sup>287</sup>

Sōseki actively counsels his audience of university students to avoid this psychosocial honeytrap of modernity and plough their own individual path instead: ‘Borrowers will always feel uneasy.’<sup>288</sup> In his own case this meant an acceptance of the fact that the authority of English critics regarding English literature was not absolute: it would be a

---

<sup>281</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>282</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>283</sup> See the Introduction to Sōseki’s *Theory of Literature* (1907).

<sup>284</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>285</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>286</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>287</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>288</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

‘scientific’<sup>289</sup> mistake to assume that his own perspective as an outsider could not enrich the discourse, or that there was a single fixed and nativist standard by which literary value - English or otherwise - could be measured. No longer viewing himself as a marginal and worthless figure everywhere he went, Sōseki’s relationship with himself subtly but importantly changes in the latter part of his stay in London: ‘I was now the host of my life, and others were guests.’<sup>290</sup> Sensing that he could only fulfil his true vocation as a writer by returning to his homeland, Sōseki unfortunately found himself in money troubles upon his return; he was forced to go back teaching - and worse, to write doggerel for trivial publications. A nervous breakdown ensued as he found himself living wrong, no longer in the old ‘fog of loneliness’ but rather amid the ‘ruins’<sup>291</sup> of a missed calling. Sōseki is clear that he doesn’t want to offer a ‘template’<sup>292</sup> for his student audience; they will have to decide for themselves how to make their own private sense of his remarks and forge their own place in the world. The elusive grail for each individual is ‘a self-confidence that is not easily broken’<sup>293</sup>; a blind feudal sense of duty to ‘nation’ or ‘family’<sup>294</sup> will no longer be enough.

The latter part of Sōseki’s speech turns to the specific privileged circumstances of the Gakushuin student cohort: these sons of gentlemen will be in a position to wield their wealth and power both to enable those around them to pursue their own ‘self-confident’ vocations and to prevent them from doing so. Such privilege, moreover, will allow its bearers to shield themselves for long periods from the need for productive activity at all, and to bask instead in the chimeric advantages of power. The responsibility to help others, Sōseki maintains, is not separate from the injunction to find meaning in one’s own activity: a true ‘vocation’ (springing, as Fromm argues, from ‘Sabbath’ freedom for spiritual creativity rather than pathological Calvinist workaholicism<sup>295</sup>) always ‘drags in’ one’s compatriots and transcends the self-other

---

<sup>289</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>290</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>291</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>292</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>293</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>294</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>295</sup> This parenthesis will make more sense on a second reading once the reader has digested Part Three.

divide.<sup>296</sup> Sōseki encourages all the students in the audience, no matter how rich, to ‘struggle’<sup>297</sup> to find their deepest callings; this is even presented as the key to human equality, for the person who struggles for her own productive freedom will not feel the need to impose her will arbitrarily on others, and will only wish such liberty for all:

As I see it, individualism advocates respecting the existence of others at the same time that one respects one's own existence. I find that a most worthy philosophy. More simply stated, individualism is a philosophy that replaces cliquism with values based on personal judgment of right and wrong. An individualist is not forever running with the group, forming cliques that thrash around blindly in the interests of power and money.<sup>298</sup>

The contrast with the feudalism of Japan's Tokugawa past and the fascism in its near future could not be starker:

Herein lies the loneliness of individualism. Before he will take a stand based on what others are doing, the individualist chooses a course of action based on the merits of the case. Sometimes, as a result, he will find himself quite alone. He will miss the comfort of having allies. And that is as it should be: even matchsticks feel secure in a bundle.<sup>299</sup>

Rather than viewing such ‘individualism’ as inimical to nation-building or as a recipe for ‘loneliness’, it is rather the *sine qua non* of all biophilic human community:

Some people nowadays are spreading the idea - and they believe it - that Japan cannot survive unless she is entirely nationalistic. Many of them go as far as to assert that our nation will perish unless this terrible 'individualism' is stamped out. What utter nonsense! We are in fact all of us nationalists and internationalists and individualists as well. Freedom is the

---

<sup>296</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>297</sup> Sōseki, ‘*Watakushi no Kojinshugi*’.

<sup>298</sup> Sōseki, in Rubin, ‘Sōseki on Individualism’, p. 42. I have indulged in Rubin's excellent translation here and below.

<sup>299</sup> Sōseki, in Rubin, ‘Sōseki on Individualism’, p. 43.

essential substance of individualism, which in turn forms the foundation of individual happiness. [...] The nation may well be important, but we cannot possibly concern ourselves with the nation from morning to night as though possessed by it. [...] What a horror if we had to [...] eat for the nation, wash our faces for the nation, go to the toilet for the nation!

[...] There is just one other thing that I would like to bring to your attention - namely, that a nationalistic morality comes out a very poor second when compared with an individualistic morality. Nations have always been most punctilious over the niceties of diplomatic language, but not so with the morality of their actions. They swindle and cheat and trick each other every chaotic step of the way. That is why you are going to have to content yourself with a pretty cheap grade of morality when you take the nation as your standard, when you conceive of the nation as an indivisible monolith. Approach things from a foundation of individualism, however, and you arrive at a far more lofty morality; the difference between the two deserves a good deal of thought.<sup>300</sup>

Sōseki's fiction, like Fromm's own *oeuvre*, amounts to a sustained modern reflection on this difference. Only the 'Sabbath' freedom to do and contribute nothing - one thinks of the languid exchanges of *Kokoro* here - can unleash the spontaneous desire to realise others while realising oneself (and *vice versa*). The alternative is slavery to an external conception of meaning; there is nothing wrong with learning Wordsworth's birthday (or being encouraged by one's elders to do so), but that is not yet humanism; the learner must decide for herself what she wishes to do with the gifts of knowledge her society bequeaths to her, not simply regurgitate them out of fear or an instinct for safety in social status.

---

<sup>300</sup> Sōseki, in Rubin, 'Sōseki on Individualism', pp. 43-45.

## 15. Salmawy: Butterfly Effects

I had the pleasure of meeting Mohamed Salmawy on a hot spring afternoon in Cairo in 2011. He kindly left me with two presents: a beautiful bilingual Arabic-French illustrated edition of his *'Ashar Bardiyāt Misriyya*, a collection of ten short stories set in ancient Egypt, and a signed copy of what was then his most recent novel, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha* (*Butterfly Wings*), which had been published on 1 January 2011 - just weeks before the Arab Spring came to town.<sup>301</sup> Salmawy himself was heavily involved in the post-Mubarak constitutional wrangling, so it is to his immense credit that he took the time to meet a researcher from New Zealand amid the chaos of those months. For me it was a tremendous opportunity to get closer to the subject of my doctoral thesis; Naguib Mahfouz died in 2006, but Salmawy had delivered Mahfouz's Nobel Lecture in 1988 on his behalf and spent many long afternoons with the old man after the Salafist attack on his life in 1994 left him unable to write (Salmawy used these encounters to pen Mahfouz's weekly column for *Al-Ahram* newspaper for more than a decade). After grazing through *'Ashar Bardiyāt Misriyya* many times over the years, I kept promising myself to return to *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*; in 2021 I finally decided that it was time to read the whole thing from start to finish. I was especially curious to see how a novel later reputed by Salmawy's publishers to have 'foreseen the events of January 25' would have held up over a decade in which the spirit of the Arab Spring 'revolutions' has been so thoroughly crushed in Egypt and beyond. What I found was a loud and eloquent protest against the authoritarian social character: the two main protagonists, Doha and Ayman, are trapped by circumstances in a state of identity crisis in which a productive orientation is impossible (Doha is stuck in an unhappy marriage to a government minister, while Ayman is unable to find his biological mother). And yet, by the end of the novel, they both find their 'wings', leaving behind 'traces' for others to follow (as the Mahmoud Darwish epigraph to the novel puts it, 'The butterfly leaves no footprint of itself / [...] Only the lightness of eternity in time / And a longing for more...<sup>302</sup>).

---

<sup>301</sup> I arrived in Egypt in mid-January 2011 to engage in six months of archival research and language learning with a view to starting a PhD on Naguib Mahfouz later in the year. I describe my experiences of the world-historic events of those months in a diary titled *Fool's Revolution*.

<sup>302</sup> See Mohamed Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, (Cairo: Al-Dar al-Misriyya al-Lubnaniyya, 2011), p. 5.

Doha's original predicament is described in the following terms:

She wasn't happy with her life. She felt that something was missing - nothing material (since she wanted for nothing in that regard), but rather a meaning. She felt that her life was unconsummated despite her outward success as a fashion designer. Her designs were celebrated more and more with every passing season - to the point where she was now a local celebrity - but none of this attention could fill the void. [...] She felt that she had not yet found herself, and that there was a worthy life out there for her that had not yet begun.<sup>303</sup>

Ayman, meanwhile, has discovered that there may be 'traces' of his biological mother in the city of Tanta: 'He had to go to Tanta to find out who he was, who his mother was, and if she was still alive. Mothers are like nations: a person who doesn't know his own mother doesn't know what nation he belongs to - a being without an origin, without roots, and without an identity.'<sup>304</sup> The two stories are developed separately: Doha travels on business to Milan as the wife of a government minister, encased in a 'lethal security which sucks the flavour and colour out of life'<sup>305</sup>; an encounter with the Egyptian political activist Dr. Ashraf al-Zaini during her time in Italy will awaken deep feelings of both artistic creativity and political solidarity with the Egyptian masses, as well as a deep sense of alienation from her loveless and premature marriage, willed by her family, to the careerist politician Medhat. Ayman's father Hasan, meanwhile, is unwilling to tell his son the truth about his mother, encouraging him to leave well alone, but Ayman undertakes the journey to Tanta anyway. In both cases, the protagonists' spontaneous search for a new and better life - symbolised by the figure of the butterfly<sup>306</sup> - will ultimately be rewarded despite the associated risks. Individual Egyptian citizens, Salmawy implies, will likewise need to change their relationships with their own lives and overcome their risk aversion and traditionalism if meaningful cultural and political reform is ever to be achieved in the country.

---

<sup>303</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, pp. 11-13.

<sup>304</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 16.

<sup>305</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 24.

<sup>306</sup> See Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 54.

That millions of young Egyptians were beginning to reach such an anti-authoritarian tipping-point was not clear to foreign observers of the Mubarak era, but Salmawy - a keen observer of Egyptian society in the Mahfouz tradition - saw the earthquake coming even if, as the last decade has proven, it wasn't big enough to transform the society into a Frommian dream overnight: 'Many people continue to underappreciate the value of this beautiful creature,'<sup>307</sup> Doha says of the butterflies that have inspired her. Such butterflies can fly anywhere and everywhere, but Egypt is home to specifically beautiful species of butterfly that the world can learn to appreciate through her designs<sup>308</sup>; instead of selling the orientalist kitsch the global market thinks it wants, Doha assumes a certain responsibility towards local manifestations of beauty in her design work, gradually overcoming the 'mental and spiritual exhaustion'<sup>309</sup> of a life spent conforming to the expectations of society instead of freely and productively contributing something of meaning to it: 'She realised that a butterfly without wings was just another insect. [...] As she read about the Egyptian tiger butterfly she felt as if she were reading about herself; aren't there those who believe in the reincarnation of souls? Perhaps she had been such an Egyptian tiger butterfly in a past life. Or maybe she was this butterfly now.'<sup>310</sup> Zhuangzi references aside, Salmawy is showing his reader that there is no sense of identity and no individual freedom without admirable examples of beauty; we are all dependent on aesthetic education to create the sense of belonging on which individual autonomy depends.

Ayman and his friend Hasan, meanwhile, compare their existential predicaments as the protest movement gets going around them:

'The truth, Hasan, is that I can't concentrate on anything else. I can't even think properly. I want to know who I am. I want to know my origins. I want to find my mother. Don't try to compare our situations...' But Hasan interrupted him: 'I'm looking for my mother too Ayman, my big cosmic mother, the mother of us all. Just as you know your mother's name, I too hear the name [Allah] everywhere and read it in books, but I don't find her in the

---

<sup>307</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 59.

<sup>308</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 66.

<sup>309</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 85.

<sup>310</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 88.

world around me. You are seeking to realise yourself just as I am, just as the whole country is.’<sup>311</sup>

Ashraf and Doha duly discuss the Butterfly Effect in this political context: ‘Every creature, no matter how small, can influence the universe,’ Ashraf declares, and Doha describes this as ‘an ingenious theory’, or indeed, ‘a theory of genius’.<sup>312</sup> Ashraf goes on to define this faith in individual action as ‘the power of civil society’<sup>313</sup>, implying that it is both the cause and effect of a nation at productive peace with itself.

Ayman’s older brother Abdussamad, meanwhile, unwilling to follow his brother to Tanta and face his mother, finds himself trapped in a web of lies with no one to protect him; he even rejects Ayman’s offer of help on the grounds that he is the proud older sibling.<sup>314</sup> Doha, however, has found in Ashraf both a spiritual equal and (for that very reason) an aspirational figure, a person to ‘respect as much as she hated the politicians she was forced to meet in her marriage. [...] Here was an example of a man who loved his country and worked sincerely to reform and improve it. He believed in what he was doing for its own sake, and did not regards politics as a mere means of self-enrichment.’<sup>315</sup> Even Doha, however, will need the support of her brother Tal’at to find the courage to ask Medhat for a divorce: ‘God has given us one life only, and it is our duty to live it happily. [...] It might surprise you to hear this from me, but let me tell you honestly: you have to ask him for a divorce. I promise to help you in any way I can.’<sup>316</sup> Tal’at urges Doha to be patient and to heed Medhat’s wishes to keep a low profile and wait for the end of the next ‘election’ cycle before granting her what she wants, but Doha’s mind is made up: she even goes and joins an anti-government protest, attracting significant media interest in the process: ‘She suddenly sensed that she was a different person. She noticed that her behaviour was now more decisive. She knew exactly what she wanted,

---

<sup>311</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 91.

<sup>312</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>313</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 101.

<sup>314</sup> See Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 112.

<sup>315</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 115.

<sup>316</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 119.

and she would accept the consequences of whatever happened on the way towards it.<sup>317</sup>

Salmawy does not shy away from portraying the dangerous proto-fascist elements of mass demonstrations, but he also recognises that a form of collective empowerment of the individual is a necessary phase in any anti-authoritarian revolutionary movement. Doha's presence emboldens others to follow her example, but she too is inspired by the equals she meets:

She looked at the girl who had taken her hand in the crowd and shouted the slogans with her. She had a classically Egyptian face which reminded her of ancient iconography. 'What's your name, sweetheart?' she asked: 'Hala,' the girl replied. Doha kissed her, and Hala smiled self-consciously. 'And your name?' 'Doha.'<sup>318</sup>

The contrast between Doha's past and present life could not be clearer: as she tells Tal'at, 'I didn't have a life at all before. Now, for the first time, I feel alive. I feel that I have a being. I sense the people around me. I feel that I have an identity, that I am part of a people and a nation. [...] To go back to my old life [with Medhat] now would be suicide. I want the life which is beginning to unfold before me.'<sup>319</sup> Doha even starts sleeping better despite the mounting revolutionary chaos and the arrest of her beloved Ashraf; new demonstrations leave her 'full of self-confidence, [...] with a feeling that she was among family and knew every one of the demonstrators personally.'<sup>320</sup>

Ayman, meanwhile, enjoys a parallel moment of communion when he finally finds his mother Amina:

It was the happiest day of Ayman's life. He wanted to tell everyone what had happened. He wanted the whole world to know that he now had a mother like the rest of humanity, and that she was alive and well. [...] 'I've only just been born now,' he tells her. [...] They gaze at each other. 'I'm so happy to have found you again, Ayman. I was living without a soul. You've

---

<sup>317</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 131.

<sup>318</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 133.

<sup>319</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 139.

<sup>320</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, pp. 142-143.

returned my soul to me today.’ ‘And you’ve returned the self I’ve been looking for,’ Ayman replies.<sup>321</sup>

Doha’s burgeoning ‘public and private’ love for the imprisoned Ashraf is strengthened in dreams where the ‘ugliness’ of the country disappears and the memories of an idealised childhood, ‘where justice reigned among people’, are recombined with future strivings.<sup>322</sup> Ayman’s brother Abdussamad, meanwhile, swindled out of his life’s savings and up to his eyeballs in debt, can see no hope for himself or the ‘dull and ignorant youths’ he passes on the banks of the Nile; with ‘no options and no future’ - and no sense of belonging - he stumbles into the abyss of prostitution.<sup>323</sup> Ayman, on the contrary, is able to make peace with his father and forgive him for his unwillingness to share the secrets of his relationship with his mother<sup>324</sup>; from this secure base with both parents, he is able to go out and join the ranks of the revolution.

Doha is duly abducted by the security forces and left in a government office ‘where a picture of the President was still hanging.’<sup>325</sup> Facing ‘the complete unknown’, she was naturally afraid, ‘unsure when it would end, or if it would end. [...] She read enough to know that this was a country where people disappeared without a trace. [...] And no one knew where she was.’<sup>326</sup>

Her whole life flashed before her eyes, her childhood and early adolescence, her rebellious phase snuffed out by her early marriage and followed by years of psychological pain, right up to her final revolt and the new life now being imposed upon her.

She found herself thinking about the last design sketch she had left on Tal’at’s kitchen table [just before her abduction]. It represented a complete break with her earlier, aesthetically empty work; a new civilisational element was there to inspire the coming generation of Egyptian women to strive for freedom and self-perfection. [...] She felt as if her new designs could be

---

<sup>321</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, pp. 145, 148.

<sup>322</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 149.

<sup>323</sup> See Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, pp. 157-159.

<sup>324</sup> See Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 165.

<sup>325</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 167.

<sup>326</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 168.

extended into a whole collection. The inner cerebral energy unleashed in this rare moment of creativity couldn't have cared less where she was now: such inspiration transcends space and time, and can arrive anywhere or anytime, even in prison or the grave.

How desperately she wanted to sketch out those designs now!<sup>327</sup>

Mubarak's Egypt was once memorably summarised for me as 'Kafka meets Dada'; Salmawy's depiction of Doha's illegal detention comes close to this description.<sup>328</sup> Abdussamad's predicament, meanwhile, reflects the other central problem at the heart of this society, namely a collective and chronic lack of money. Stumbling out of a client's house at dawn, Abdussamad 'stops to ponder the Nile':

He remembered the final scene in the film adaptation of *Bidaya wa Nihaya* where the protagonist, Nafisa, throws herself into the river. This figure from Naguib Mahfouz's famous novel enters the Cairo underworld when her life is already devoid of meaning and value. Nafisa's excuse was that she needed money. [...] He, too, needed the money.<sup>329</sup>

Rather than seeking the support of his family and community and fashioning a creative identity for himself, Abdussamad decides that he must face his debts alone and cut himself off from all ties: 'A person faced with debts he cannot repay should give up worrying about his place in the cosmic order. He now had to take care of himself without relying on anyone.'<sup>330</sup> Whether he follows Nafisa's example or continues to sell his body on the Cairo streets, Abdussamad's spiritual state, Salmawy suggests, will remain the same. Pushed by desperate circumstances, Abdussamad opts for the very 'suicide' that Doha sought to avoid by assuming the risks of her political and artistic engagement.

Other heroes emerge as the revolution takes form. The Defence Minister in particular sacrifices himself to the cause: 'The army belongs to the people of this country; it is not an instrument of any ruling party.

---

<sup>327</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, pp. 168-169.

<sup>328</sup> See Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 170.

<sup>329</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 171.

<sup>330</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 172.

History will not record that I set the Egyptian Army and the Egyptian people against each other,' the Minister tells a hostile cabinet 'with self-confident clarity of purpose'.<sup>331</sup> Ashraf emerges from prison to lead the revolution, even while reminding his audience that this was 'the beginning, not the end' of a long process of reform.<sup>332</sup> Doha too is

liberated from the women's prison to which she was transferred, and at the same time liberated from the prison in which she had lived her whole prior life. [...] Without fear or hesitation, Doha and Ashraf enjoy a long and long-awaited kiss, the herald of a new life starting in that very moment - not only for the two of them as a couple, but for the whole Egyptian people.<sup>333</sup>

Ayman too, after heavy involvement in revolutionary events, returns to Tanta to see his mother:

She talked for a long time about her past and present life, and introduced her son to her husband. To Ayman's surprise, the man did not hate him: he was a kind-hearted sort despite his rural conservative views. Ayman talked about his life too and his hopes for the future with his new girlfriend Salwa, and his mother asked to meet her.<sup>334</sup>

The novel ends with Ayman and Salwa heading off 'into the sun' towards Tanta.<sup>335</sup>

Salmawy conspicuously avoids mention (at least in *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*) of the role of traditionalist religion in maintaining the authoritarian *status quo* in Egypt and across the Arab world. My own conclusion upon leaving Egypt in July 2011 was that theological reform would be required before a democratic political culture and productively oriented economy could be established. As I bluntly put it in my diaries at the time, 'Egypt needs to sort out its revelation issues before it can reach revolution. Tackling the illiteracy problem would be a start;

---

<sup>331</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 177.

<sup>332</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 182.

<sup>333</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, pp. 183-184.

<sup>334</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 185.

<sup>335</sup> Salmawy, *Ajnihat al-Farāsha*, p. 186.

smashing the taboo against denying the inimitability of the Qur'an or the veracity of Muhammad's direct line to the sky will be necessary too, and soon.'<sup>336</sup> I have spent a good part of the last decade trying to find Arab voices - Naguib Mahfouz and Adonis chief among them - who share this broad thesis without wishing to throw out the baby with the bathwater of the last 1400 years of Islamic civilisation. Salmawy's *Ajnihāt al-Farāsha* shows how such a humanistic reorientation of Arab society can start within individual families - and individuals within those families - via a kind of literary psychoanalysis for those exhausted (consciously or otherwise) by decades of brutal tyranny and underdevelopment. The events of 2011, which Salmawy's novel brilliantly foreshadows, represented a conscious first step pioneered by a few brave individuals. A decade on, however, the collective patient is still firmly on the couch, in Egypt and everywhere else the 'Arab Spring' came to town. Without wishing to dampen Salmawy's butterfly optimism, it may be that a million or more Dohas have to rot anonymously in Arab prisons before future Arab generations can enjoy the freedoms such courage bequeaths, and before the rest of the world can once again be transfixed and inspired by events in Cairo.

---

<sup>336</sup> *Fool's Revolution*, p. 26.

## 16. Dovlatov: *Ars Lunga*

*For as long as I've known myself, the social question has been more important to me than any other: in Recife, the mocambos were the first truth for me. Long before I sensed the meaning of 'art', I felt the profound beauty of the struggle [for political freedom]. [...] But what I can't seem to do, much as it pains and shames me, is to use my writing for the purposes of furthering justice. It's as if the feelings involved are so obvious and primary that I can't surprise myself with them - and if I can't surprise myself, I can't write anything. [...] It's not a question of not wanting to, but rather of not being able. What I am ashamed of is of not doing more, not contributing with actions, [...] and I hope to stay that way. But I won't let myself be ashamed of what I do write: it would be sinfully proud of me to do so.*

Clarice Lispector,  
'*Literatura e justiça*'

Sergey Dovlatov (1941-1990) takes aim at fellow Russian émigré writer Vladimir Nabokov in the 1988 short story 'Zhizn' Korotka' ('Life's Short') via a parodic reconstruction of Nabokov's meeting with the poet Bella Akhmedulina (1937-2010) in the months before Nabokov's death in 1977. Nabokov's star has so far burned brightest among the 20th-century Russian émigré cohort (Dovlatov probably comes in somewhere behind his friend Joseph Brodsky in the top five), but there is a clear wish on the part of this self-deprecating alcoholic to cut the author of *Lolita* down to size. Nabokov's critics point to a supposed 'mandarin indifference'<sup>337</sup> to the suffering of others in his work, while defenders - my brilliant thesis supervisor Brian Boyd chief among them - suggest just the opposite: a principled stylistic unwillingness to euphemise suffering away, an unwavering ability to poke his finger into the wound (pedophilia, incest and so on).

---

<sup>337</sup> I owe this formulation to Sally Bachner's *The Prestige of Violence: American Fiction, 1962-2007*, (University of Georgia Press, 2011), p. 33, though Bachner herself questions its applicability to Nabokov's life and work.

As Nabokov's official biographer, Boyd enjoyed sustained and privileged access to the archives of the real man in question, and was able to produce, beyond the biographies themselves, more or less adoring books like *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton University Press, 2001). Something grates the working man, however, in Nabokov's posture of inaccessible and self-referential genius: works like *Pale Fire* in particular are designed to be *re-read* - not at all a bad thing in itself, but carried too far a kind of fodder destined to make a laughing stock of both the lay readers who cannot understand them and the small clique of tenured experts who fall for the sadistic 'Joycean trap'<sup>338</sup> and spend years squabbling over them. Dovlatov's 'Levitsky', transparently a version of Nabokov, may not be the most plausible or accurate portrait of the real man, but spectre of Levitsky nevertheless haunts Nabokov's legacy, and interests us here for its own sake, independent of the biographical truth: the man Dovlatov shows us, for all his famed lepidopterological passion for exotic butterfly specimens, is missing a vital chromosome of love for his fellow creatures, and is set to die alone in unproductive sterility. It is as if Levitsky, ensconced in his Swiss hotel and his own genius, would have found no beauty or pangs of conscience in the face of Lispector's *mocambos*:

Levitsky opened his eyes and suddenly found himself striving to remember a vanishing metaphor. 'Half-moon mint tablets?' 'Banana crescent curve?' Something like that, only more meaningful.

These metaphors came at night, once he was already horizontal. The maestro had always been lazy about writing them down, but in his younger days he would remember them until morning. Nowadays, as a rule, they would go forgotten, though not without a certain pleasure.<sup>339</sup>

This is by no means enough to condemn Levitsky on its own, but Dovlatov's narrator is only getting started. In proletarian contrast to

---

<sup>338</sup> See Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, (New York, OUP, 1982), p. 521: 'I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of ensuring one's immortality.' Joyce is referring to his *Ulysses* here but the same logic is pushed *ad absurdum* in *Finnegan's Wake*.

<sup>339</sup> Sergey Dovlatov, 'Zhizn' Korotka' ('Life's Short'), in *Zhizn' Korotka: Rasskazy*, (St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2019(1988)), p. 5.

Levitsky's prerevolutionary aristocratic airs, 'Regina Gasparyan' (i.e. Akhmedulina) was 'the typical Soviet schoolgirl', the daughter of an Armenian high-school teacher ('rehabilitated under Khrushchev') and 'a qualified translator [...] with an overbearing character and exotic Eastern features.'<sup>340</sup> After the Thaw, the Gasparyan house 'filled up with young people, above all poets. The Gasparyans fed them, and above all, patiently listened to them.'<sup>341</sup>

The famed Nabokovian impatience with *poshlost'* or vulgarity of any kind, mercilessly parodied by Dovlatov in '*Zhizn' Korotka*', makes such a heartwarming scene seem impossible in Levitsky's universe - and it is the character of Levitsky that interests us here, precisely because he seems to be missing something so fundamental to a 'productive' human life'<sup>342</sup>:

Everyone knew about his eccentricities, such as the chalk line drawn through the rooms of the Swiss hotel suite where he lived, beyond which neither his wife nor cook could pass. [...] His arrogance and unavailability - ultimately the same thing - were the stuff of legend. He once told a well-known Swiss writer seeking an audience: 'Come by after two - in six years.'<sup>343</sup>

Regina, however, has set a great deal of store by her meeting with Levitsky: 'Much will depend on it.'<sup>344</sup> Dovlatov's narrator explains: 'I think she wanted to become a writer. She didn't really trust the judgment of her friends. She didn't want to turn to any grey Soviet eminences either. She was not to be calmed by any generic praise.'<sup>345</sup>

Six years of vainly seeking Levitsky passed, and Regina published her first book to 'positive critical reviews', including one by our narrator.<sup>346</sup> In the meantime she has acquired a one-of-a-kind exemplar

---

<sup>340</sup> Dovlatov, '*Zhizn' Korotka*', p. 7.

<sup>341</sup> Dovlatov, '*Zhizn' Korotka*', p. 7.

<sup>342</sup> Vera Nabokov in any case took pity on a young Brian Boyd when he came to town shortly after Nabokov's death, offering the poor and dishevelled graduate student from New Zealand some of the master's clothes.

<sup>343</sup> Dovlatov, '*Zhizn' Korotka*', pp. 8-9.

<sup>344</sup> Dovlatov, '*Zhizn' Korotka*', p. 9.

<sup>345</sup> Dovlatov, '*Zhizn' Korotka*', P. 9.

<sup>346</sup> Dovlatov, '*Zhizn' Korotka*', p. 11.

of Levitsky's lost juvenilia; hoping this will finally persuade Levitsky to correspond with her, Regina is nevertheless warned by friends and colleagues to avoid a face-to-face meeting ('Levitsky told Edmund Wilson that I was, unfortunately, shit'<sup>347</sup>; 'Levitsky is not a Christian - he's too selfish for that'<sup>348</sup> etc.). The meeting, of course, takes place: 'As she sat waiting in the hallway, Regina wondered: Why exactly did this man live in a hotel? Was it perhaps because he despised the idea of property? She would have to ask him this question, and also what he thought of Solzhenitsyn - they were so different after all!'<sup>349</sup> The touching innocence of Regina's vulgarity meets a man who 'knew English from childhood'<sup>350</sup> (thanks to a governess) and only later endured relative hardship on the run from Lenin and Hitler: unaware of the effort required to break into the realm of high culture from the outside, Levitsky has been able to spend his whole adult life looking down his nose at the *parvenus* in his midst, and to sell himself in a new world that regards him with awe as a bastion of old Russian culture. In her admiration for this tradition - based on the partial knowledge of the Soviet student - Regina is naturally eager, not for 'recognition' as such, but at least for confirmation from a trusted source of the validity of her efforts to contribute to it. Levitsky, however, utterly betrays this trust; all he worries about is destroying his own juvenilia, which reveal him to be as mortal and vulgar as everyone else:

'And now if you'll excuse me. Administrative matters...'

Levitsky went up to the third floor and stopped at the door to his suite. He took the manuscript out of the envelope, tore off the address and put it in his trouser pocket. Opening the nickel-plated waste chute, he ceremonially cast his own teenage notebook into the abyss before casually tossing [Regina's] manuscript down behind it. He happened to catch sight of the title as it went in - *Summer in Karlsbad*. The text of his letter came to him immediately: 'I read your warm and bright *Summer* - twice. There is a sense of life and death in it, and a presaging of autumn. Congratulations.'

---

<sup>347</sup> Dovlatov, 'Zhizn' Korotka', p. 12.

<sup>348</sup> Dovlatov, 'Zhizn' Korotka', p. 12.

<sup>349</sup> Dovlatov, 'Zhizn' Korotka', p. 12.

<sup>350</sup> Dovlatov, 'Zhizn' Korotka', p. 8.

He went back to his suite and summoned the cook: 'Shall we play cards?'<sup>351</sup>

Levitsky's condescending comment to Regina during their meeting - 'the important thing to remember, dear, is that life is short'<sup>352</sup> - throws his own solitude into stark relief: he already has no real life at all, no spiritual equals left. Nothing he could produce in such a state will survive into the human future as art; at least Regina, for all her middlebrow sophomoric traits, has aesthetic and moral development ahead of her, while Levitsky, the author of one of the bestselling books of all time (*Lolita* has sold even more copies than *The Art of Loving*), is left playing cards with the cook.

The short story '*Inaya Zhizn*' ('The Lives of Others'), also from Dovlatov's *Zhizn' Korotka* collection, makes a similar point about artistic productivity. The Soviet philologist-protagonist Krasnoperov goes to Paris to work in the archives of Ivan Bunin (Nabokov's only real rival for the title of greatest Russian émigré author). Fascinated by the uncouth painters who visited his house as a child, Krasnoperov develops a healthy curiosity about other people in general: 'At the end of the day the painters would go home, leaving behind in our apartment traces of a foreign and secret life.'<sup>353</sup> In transit in Stockholm on his way to Paris, Krasnoperov 'already felt that he was abroad': "'How strange," he thought, "distant lives - and I am but a guest in them!"'<sup>354</sup> Dovlatov's subtitle to *Inaya Zhizn* is the ironic-enough 'A Sentimental Story', but there is nothing sentimental about his conclusion: after a thrilling and oniric stay in a decadently trivial, anti-Soviet Paris (starting with the flight spent next to a man from Southern Rhodesia - 'the lives of others are a mystery'<sup>355</sup>), Krasnoperov is sad and worried to return to Leningrad ('Goodbye France! [...] Goodbye to those foreign lives! Unpleasantness and trouble await me!'<sup>356</sup>). On the way back to his humble sixth-story Leningrad abode, however, realising that a man he thinks is a beggar 'only wants to talk' to him,

---

<sup>351</sup> Dovlatov, '*Zhizn' Korotka*', p. 15.

<sup>352</sup> Dovlatov, '*Zhizn' Korotka*', p. 13.

<sup>353</sup> Dovlatov, '*Inaya Zhizn*', in *Zhizn' Korotka: Rasskazy*, p. 70.

<sup>354</sup> Dovlatov, '*Inaya Zhizn*', p. 68.

<sup>355</sup> Dovlatov, '*Inaya Zhizn*', p. 75.

<sup>356</sup> Dovlatov, '*Inaya Zhizn*', p. 103.

Krasnoperov was overcome by a sudden calm. Everything around him became painfully near and dear: the drunk in the sour cream-stained coat, the cracks in the asphalt pavement, the enamel nameplate on his buzzer. Even that which awaited him was vital: the cold twilight of the stairwell with its ruined steps, the dim bulb amid the wire mesh of the hallway, the calico-covered door, and above all the neighbours in his communal apartment - the Gendliny family, the Margulisy family, the Sharoshenidzes - and his own book-strewn hovel. He was at peace with everything that had been and everything that would be. This was all part of a unique, necessary, and familiar life.<sup>357</sup>

Superficial access to 'foreign lives and faraway worlds', however splendid and interesting, does not actually plumb 'the mysteries of existence': 'the key,' the narrator concludes, 'is always somewhere in our own one.'<sup>358</sup>

The next story in *Zhizn' Korotka* is 'about a prince and a beggar'; the narrator of '*Kurtka Fernana Lezhe*' ('Fernand Léger's Coat'), born underprivileged in 1941 to the malnourished son of a 'bourgeois nationalist', becomes childhood friends with Andryusha, son of famous Soviet actor Nikolay Cherkasov (1903-1966).<sup>359</sup> The narrator gradually loses touch with Andryusha and his ever-benevolent<sup>360</sup> and well-connected family, but he bumps into Nikolay's widow Nina years later as an adult: 'As I now realise, Nina Cherkasova possessed the usual strengths and weaknesses of rich people. She was brave, decisive, and focused on her goals, but also cold, arrogant, and aristocratically naïve. For instance, she considered money a heavy burden.'<sup>361</sup> The narrator, meanwhile, is at peace with his lot - well, sort of: 'I'm not sorry for the poverty I've endured. If Hemingway is to be believed, poverty is an indispensable rite of passage for all artists. Poverty sharpens the wits, or

---

<sup>357</sup> Dovlatov, '*Inaya Zhizn*', p. 106.

<sup>358</sup> Dovlatov, '*Inaya Zhizn*', pp. 108-109.

<sup>359</sup> Dovlatov, '*Kurtka Fernana Lezhe*', in *Zhizn' Korotka: Rasskazy*, p. 110.

<sup>360</sup> The Cherkasovs' housekeepers, however, hated the young 'prince' Andryusha's prole friend: 'It should have been otherwise; they should have loved me more for sharing their origins. In reality, servants often love their odious masters much more than it seems, and in any case much more than they love themselves.' (Dovlatov, '*Kurtka Fernana Lezhe*', pp. 113-114)

<sup>361</sup> Dovlatov, '*Kurtka Fernana Lezhe*', p. 114.

something like that. Funny, though, that Hemingway figured all this out after he became rich.’<sup>362</sup> The narrator and Andryusha begin to move in different social circles as teenagers (Andryusha is sent to the ‘English’ school, the narrator to the ‘normal’ one<sup>363</sup>):

I would go to Andryusha’s place to watch the colour television. [...] In our high-school years, each of us started making his own circle of friends. Mine was dominated by the delinquent type, but Andryusha’s mates naturally came from good families. I guess there might be something in Marxist-Leninist teaching after all: deep social instincts live in all of us. I have automatically and consciously been pulled, throughout my life, to flawed people - beggars, yobs, inexperienced poets and the like. I have failed a thousand times among decent folk, and only felt sure of myself in the company of savages, schizophrenics and assorted trash. [...] My friends inspired panic in Andryusha; they were threatened constantly by something or other, and they responded with the only available form of self-affirmation: conflict.

Andryusha’s friends also filled me with insecurity and anguish: they were honest, reasonable and kind, with an instinct for compromise.<sup>364</sup>

The ‘equally lazy’<sup>365</sup> boyhood friends drift apart, ‘not because of any fight or mutual disappointment’<sup>366</sup>, but simply in the nature of things (the narrator - Dovlatov himself, or so one feels - begins to take writing seriously, while Andryusha, to his credit, embarks on a PhD in physics). Bumping into Nina while ‘forced to check the Lenin quotes in the memoirs of a tundra conqueror’<sup>367</sup> at the House of Journalists, the narrator strikes up a long conversation about life and art with his old friend’s mother. Returning from Paris some weeks later, Nina brings back the tattered coat of the great French artist, an old high-society chum, as a present; the narrator is confused at first, but after Nina

---

<sup>362</sup> Dovlatov, ‘*Kurtka Fernana Lezhe*’, p. 114.

<sup>363</sup> Dovlatov, ‘*Kurtka Fernana Lezhe*’, p. 114.

<sup>364</sup> Dovlatov, ‘*Kurtka Fernana Lezhe*’, pp. 115-116.

<sup>365</sup> Dovlatov, ‘*Kurtka Fernana Lezhe*’, p. 114.

<sup>366</sup> Dovlatov, ‘*Kurtka Fernana Lezhe*’, p. 117.

<sup>367</sup> Dovlatov, ‘*Kurtka Fernana Lezhe*’, p. 119.

explains that Léger's wife told her that her husband 'wanted to pass it on as a friend to some worthy vagrant or other'<sup>368</sup>, its meaning for him suddenly transcends its celebrity memorabilia status and potential resale value:

I looked at the oil-paint stains for a long time, and even started to wish there were more of them. [...] Then I began to think about what I knew about Fernand Léger: a tall, strong son of Norman peasants, sent to the Front in 1915, where he cut his bread with a blood-stained bayonet. [...] Later, like Mayakovsky, he struggled with his art. But whereas Mayakovsky committed suicide, Léger survived and triumphed. [...] He felt that form was more important than colour, and that art, from Shakespeare to Edith Piaf, lived from contrasts. [...] He also died a communist, believing forever in that enormous and unprecedented joke. [...] I wore the coat for nearly a decade at every solemn opportunity, although the oil-paint stains gradually disappeared as the velvet wore out. A few people knew that the coat had belonged to Léger, but I enjoyed keeping my pathetic little secret as well.<sup>369</sup>

Dovlatov's most famous book, *Chemodan (The Suitcase)*, does something similar with the emigrant author's Soviet experience: the shameful vulgarity and poverty of the whole thing does not in any way make the life experience of a Levitsky (or any other refined aristocratic 'world author') more meaningful. The artistic 'productivity' in question comes out of the intensity of the individual's relationship with her own circumstances: Regina's instinct to seek out Levitsky's learned opinion is natural and healthy, as is Dovlatov's own decision to emigrate from a mad society, but the goal should not be some sort of absolution or 'escape' from one's prior life, only ever a deepening of our lives' one-off authenticity. 'Art' and productive life in general were possible in the Soviet Union, even as the system Dovlatov and other *samizdat* authors so dryly described was every bit as dangerous and inconducive to biophilic health as the century's right-wing totalitarianisms:

Time passed. We ended up in America. Nina Cherkasova passed on and left my mother 1500 rubles - big money in the USSR. [...]

---

<sup>368</sup> Dovlatov, 'Kurtka Fernana Lezhe', p. 122.

<sup>369</sup> Dovlatov, 'Kurtka Fernana Lezhe', p. 123.

In August my brother let me know that the money had been received. No great expressions of gratitude were forthcoming on his part; maybe the money wasn't worth that much after all.

My brother would often call me early in the morning, which meant the middle of the night in Leningrad. His voice on such occasions was often suspiciously hoarse.

[...] '*Ny kak delaaaa v Ameeeeerike?* They tell me you can buy vodka round the clock over there.'

'I'm not sure about that. But the bars are open.'

'Beer then?'

'Yes, there's as much beer as you want at the corner stores.'

A short pause would follow.

'Those capitalists are smart as fuck!'

'How are *you* doing?' I would then ask.

'A'ight.'

But I digress. Andryusha is doing fine too. In winter he will finally finish his PhD in physics or applied mathematics or something.<sup>370</sup>

---

<sup>370</sup> Dovatov, '*Kurtka Fernana Lezhe*', pp. 123-124.

## 17. Amado: Modern Miracle

*To the extent that the map can change the territory by determining an undetermined space or feature, by designating its use or at least suggesting it by name, I have likely both narrowed and expanded [the] original text in my translation here. [...] What I hope to have generated is microsuspense: the desire to keep reading, the drive to turn the page.<sup>371</sup>*

Jennifer Croft

This chapter will belong to the 20th-century novel that I would, if pushed, call the most implicitly ‘Frommian’ of all: Jorge Amado’s 1969 *Tenda dos Milagres* (*Tent of Miracles*). Protagonist Pedro Archanjo’s solution to the problem of race and national ethos in Brazil - namely a biophilic ‘miscegenation’ - is not merely proposed, but embodied from the very beginning in the narrator’s heavy use of Yoruba, Kikongo and other terms of African origin in his Portuguese text. That Amado’s beloved Bahia might serve as a microcosm of a postracial ‘World Ethos’, however, does not mean that the modern obstacles which present themselves in such stark relief against the backdrop of Pedro Archanjo’s humble productivity are not significant: even if Brazil overcomes its race problem, the deeper temptations of (self-)marketing will remain to thwart all those who wish to live for the joy of freely undertaken work rather than the mere appearance of work. Archanjo dies in obscure misery while others infinitely lazier and luckier, less brave and more cunning, prosper. Amado can already see the next hill beyond the primitive racism of early 20th-century Salvador: even if authoritarian Arianism was on its way out by 1969 thanks to the efforts of the likes of Archanjo and his spiritual descendants, the ‘marketing mentality’ remained alive and well in Brazilian society, with all the attendant dangers to human health and happiness.

The cryptic epigraph Amado chooses from his brother James’s notes to the complete works of colonial poet Gregório de Matos (1636-1696) suggests that, from the beginning, racism is only the

---

<sup>371</sup> Jennifer Croft, ‘The Order of Things’, <https://lithub.com/the-order-of-things-jennifer-croft-on-translating-olga-tokarczuk/>, 1/2/2022 (accessed 14/2/2022).

apparent central theme of *Tenda dos Milagres*; in the age of mass communication, great people of all colours have their work distorted into propaganda:

There is a great trend abroad [in biographical writing]: to make [our heroes] conform to an existing image. Immense robots, docile and institutionalised, are thus made of them - similar to the original perhaps, but neater and better behaved. In such a state they enter the primary and secondary schools, the bookshops and newspapers. Carefully managed in our universities and propaganda agencies, these squares are distributed for all ages with the efficiency of restrained truth, [...] just like any other industrial product.

[...] Our men and women of letters should realise that [Gregório de Matos] was not interested in being perceived as just or unjust, important or anonymous; he did not hide out in a hermit's sanctuary, but nor did he seek to hide in plain sight. He thereby avoided the sterility of mere activism but also that of contemplation without engagement. He *lived* the life his poetry taught him, embodying love and human liberty beyond all common measure.

[...] This image is reproduced here in all its purity - or impurity if you prefer.<sup>372</sup>

(Jorge) Amado is not reducing Pedro Archanjo by colonial comparison here: on the contrary, he is trying to carve out a mental space by which we can apprehend a real human being in his one-off context (just as his brother James sought to do with Gregório de Matos). The humble *tenda* which Archanjo and his friend Lídio Corró turned into a 'popular university'<sup>373</sup>, mixing Western learning with African folk practices and copious quantities of dance and drink, may indeed be a symbol of something bigger than itself, but it is also something now useful to researchers and publicists keen to flaunt their anti-racist credentials and thereby further their own 'careers'. The quasi-narrator figure of Fausto Pena, 'poet and social science graduate'<sup>374</sup>, is the perfect embodiment of this modern spirit, though Amado maintains an ironic distance

---

<sup>372</sup> Jorge Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres (Tent of Miracles)*, (São Paulo: Grapiúna, 2008(1969)), p. 8.

<sup>373</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 15.

<sup>374</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 17.

throughout: sadly the whole burst of interest in Pedro Archanjo, including Pena's own dollar-funded 'study'<sup>375</sup>, was driven by the arrival in Bahia of Nobel Prize-winning American anthropologist James D. Levenson. Rather than taking an interest in Archanjo for his own sake, Pena and local newspaper editors self-loathingly jump on the bandwagon of *gringo* prestige and publicity. Pena's generalised resentment - Levenson even steals his dream woman Ana Mercedes while he's in town - morphs into entitlement:

My name is not cited once, and there are no references whatsoever to my work in Levenson's pages [on Archanjo]. I thus feel more than happy to accept the offer which has just been made to me by Mr. Dmeval Chaves, the wealthy bookstore owner on rua da Ajuda, to edit and publish these unpretentious pages. Unfortunately however, he has imposed unfair conditions; as is well known, Mr. Chaves, rolling in money, is tight with royalties, following a long line of local editorial tradition of which, as we shall see further, Pedro Archanjo himself was a victim.<sup>376</sup>

Amado thus foregrounds not only the ludicrous relationship between substance and payment in the modern world, but above all the deleterious effects of such distortions of justice on individual character: while both worshipping and hating Levenson, Pena inadvertently shows his reader the difference between humanism as a 'real utopia'<sup>377</sup>, embodied by Archanjo, and the 'humanism' of swanning Ivy League privilege proclaimed, but not quite embodied, by Levenson, and certainly not embodied by himself:

'I came here to see the city where an important man with profound and generous ideas, a veritable creator of humanism, Pedro Archanjo, lived and worked. I came to Bahia for this reason alone.'

[...] Levenson's] eyes fell again on Ana Mercedes, and he proceeded to undress her with his eyes. [...] In one of his books, Archanjo wrote: The beauty of our women, the ordinary women

---

<sup>375</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 17.

<sup>376</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 21.

<sup>377</sup> This is a reference to a German volume of selected Fromm texts, *Humanismus als reale Utopie* (Basel: Beltz, 1992), edited by Rainer Funk.

on our streets, is due to our evolution as a *mestizo* capital, a beacon of love between the races and a future without prejudice.’ He stared again at that stomach, that umbilical cord to the world itself, and he said in his brutal and grammatically correct Ivy League Spanish: ‘I would compare Archanjo’s work to this woman here. *Igualita*.’

[...] Thus began, [at a press conference] on a pleasant April afternoon, the fame and glory of Pedro Archanjo in Bahia. [...] Public recognition, applause, the admiration of scholars, the mention of his name in the social columns, the hysterical shouting of masses of women [...] - all that came to him *post mortem*, when it was no longer of any use to him.<sup>378</sup>

Pena’s obvious jealousy of Archanjo’s American admirer does not prevent us from appreciating either the relative merits of the man or the tempting rewards his celebrity offers, either by association or in the flesh:

Levenson was not only a genius; he was also photogenic. [...] His conferences, followed by intense Q and A debates, gave way to violent student demonstrations against the local dictatorship and in favour of the foreign sage. Standing ovations ended in delirium more than once. Certain Levenson pearls made their way as slogans from one end of the country to the other: ‘Better ten years of interminable international conferences than a single day of war, and they are cheaper anyway’; ‘Prisons and policemen are equally sordid in all dictatorships without exception’; ‘The world will only really be civilised when all uniforms are in museums’ etc.

Surrounded by photographers and moviestars, Levenson reserved his mornings for the beach and his tiny Speedos. [...] When would he be able to enjoy the Brazilian sun again?<sup>379</sup>

Nevertheless, it is Levenson’s celebrity, not the work of the *Tenda*, that allows Archanjo, ‘in whose books science is poetry’, to be rediscovered in Brazil, rescued from the oblivion of ‘articles in specialist journals

---

<sup>378</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>379</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 26.

barely circulated and, alas, even less read.’<sup>380</sup> The wave of interest spawned by Levenson’s praise of a man regarded a generation earlier as a ‘drunk and subversive nigger’<sup>381</sup> by Brazilian conservatives is nevertheless largely disingenuous:

In general our intellectuals sought to prove, in their interviews and articles, their radio and television appearances, that they had enjoyed prolonged and intimate contact with Archanjo and his work. [...] In the midst of this pseudoerudite and burlesque mediocrity, two or three truly serious and worthy contributions are worth noting, for instance the long interview granted by a certain Prof. Azevedo in the evening paper *A Tarde*.

Though holding a sociology chair, the professor had nothing like the urgent thirst for self-promotion common to our intellectual class. He actually knew Archanjo’s work...<sup>382</sup>

The centenary celebrations organised by the *Jornal da Cidade* in 1968, indeed, arise less out of any lived understanding of the importance of Archanjo’s *oeuvre* than because ‘the paper needs a good publicity campaign’<sup>383</sup>. Major Damião de Souza, the closest thing to a living spiritual descendant of Pedro Archanjo, fleshes out the details with paper director Dr. Zezinho Pinto:

‘Major, you’ve given me the idea for the promotion of the year: the centenary of Archanjo’s birth. I don’t know how to thank you, how to pay you.’

The eminent citizen Souza smiled; there was no greater payment, no higher form of remuneration the director could offer. [...] ‘Don’t worry about that, my man,’ Souza replied. ‘Come with me to the Bar dos Focas and buy me a cognac, or rather two, not counting your own. We’ll pour one out for old Archanjo too; he loved a drop. Let’s go over now - no time like the present.’

The director wasn’t keen on downing a local cognac on a slum tavern balcony, let alone in the mid-afternoon heat, even if he did ply the Major with a generous pour of *cachaça* in his

---

<sup>380</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 27.

<sup>381</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 28.

<sup>382</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>383</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 63.

office. Still, the good days are over: you pay for everything now, one way or another.<sup>384</sup>

The *tenda* ran on a different principle:

In the thinning rays of a warm dusk, a purple twilight glow, the master Lídio Corró, sincere and involved, admires the work of art he has just completed: another quiet masterpiece to come out of this office, this *Tenda dos Milagres*, [...] where a humble but competent artist labours in his calling. [...] One only had to ask around in the streets to know who Lídio Corró was and what marvels he created there.

But he wasn't on his own; there were two of them: Lídio Corró and Pedro Archanjo, almost always together, and with no one who could come between them: *compadres*, *irmãos*, more than brothers even, *mabaças*, *ibejis*, two *exus* let loose on the city.<sup>385</sup>

Lídio will sell most of his art and develop a printing business to keep the whole thing (barely) viable, later publishing his mate Pedro's writing. Not even the incomparable beauty of Rosa de Oxalá, whose sporadic dancing presence, lingering nocturnal perfume and 'languid Yoruba eyes'<sup>386</sup> really keep the place alive, will come between them. For all his fame as a *mulherengo*, Pedro is able to sacrifice his one real passion for his friend:

You have to understand, Rosa, and stop looking at me like that; if Lídio had been born to my own mother and father, he would be less of a brother to me than he is, and I would owe him less decency and loyalty.

No, our love can never be, even if I die of it first, even if my heart explodes or roams from port to port in pursuit of your night aroma. [...] We are not marionettes for others; we have our own honour and feelings. We are not the sex-addicted animals and criminals our enemies claim. Yes, Rosa, this is exactly the point: 'Degenerate *mestiços* in sordid and foul promiscuity' as one

---

<sup>384</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 63.

<sup>385</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>386</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 83.

tenured local Professor of Medicine put it. No, Rosa, it's a lie: we're more than that.

[...] I will forget you in the *gringa*, in Sabina, in Rosenda, in Risoleta, and in many others; I will remain free from torment and affliction. Really? Will I forget or will I search in increasing desperation [...] for a solution] to your enigma, to your forbidden eternal love?<sup>387</sup>

What matters, however, is that Lídio never discovers the 'price'<sup>388</sup> of his friendship; despite Pedro's relentless womanising, he keeps his hands off Rosa to the end. Without ever quite sanctifying the man's voracious sexual appetite, Amado at least makes clear that there was not a trace of *négritude* in Archanjo's equal-opportunity lovemaking; the 'Swedish visitor' (who turns out to be Finnish) carries his baby happily back to Helsinki after enjoying several months in the atmosphere of the *Tenda*:

The *Tenda dos Milagres* had become a kind of Senate for the noble poor, a numerous and vital assembly of *ialorixás*, *babalaôs*, poets, *santeiros*, singers, passersby, *capoeira* masters and other artists, each with her own sphere of expertise. [...] Only a handful knew that Kirsi was Finnish rather than Swedish, but they all esteemed her. Welcomed without any questions, she had become one of them.

'[...] It's time I go; I'm carrying our baby in my womb, but everything good has a finite lifespan, and we have to stop at the right time if we want it to last forever. I'll take the sun, your music and blood with me, you'll be wherever I am in all times. Thanks, Oju.'

'There are no better people anywhere than you lot, no more civilised society than the *mulatos* of Bahia,' the Swede said in her farewell to the *Tenda*. [...] Somewhere in cold Suomi, [Pedro imagined] a boy made of sun and snow, heart of bronze, with a *paxorô* in his right hand - the King of Scandinavia.<sup>389</sup>

If a brave northern traveller could grasp this beauty, why did the racist local aristocracy have such fear and loathing of it? Amado will double

---

<sup>387</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 87.

<sup>388</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 222.

<sup>389</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 90-91, 95.

back to this important question in the second half of the novel, but by the time of the centenary celebrations, it is the 'indocile opportunist'<sup>390</sup> Fausto Pena's status anxiety and struggles for attention, typical of his generation, that are the main obstacles to an understanding of Archanjo's humanism:

I must sadly acknowledge: jealousy and arrogance are rotting the hearts of our best intellectuals. [...] After being honoured with Levenson's (verbal) contract to research the life of Pedro Archanjo, [...] I am now covered in slime, [...] accused of being a minion of North American imperialism, [...] and prevented from accessing founts of publicity and sponsorship so vital for all those who desire - as I desire - to make a name for themselves. [...] Please tell me: who would have been a better collaborator, nay *director*, for this [*Jornal da Cidade* centenary project] than the direct assistant of the genius from Columbia University, chosen by him to research the life of our immortal Bahian friend? This man was not only put in charge and contracted but *paid* - yes, PAID (let me write this holy word in capital letters) - for his services by a transcontinental genius - and in dollars. [...] But take it from me: I received only rotten tomatoes here, and obstacles were placed between me and the editors at every turn. [...] In the end I was offered a risible sum for the documentation I had collected, and no chance whatsoever to tie my name to the public fanfare.<sup>391</sup>

Archanjo is thus reduced to a bone to be fought over by the surviving dogs; Amado describes at some length 'how our consumer society drove the celebrations of the Archanjo centenary'<sup>392</sup>, ironically giving him 'meaning and consequence'<sup>393</sup> in a world where he would otherwise have been forgotten. The exceptions, like the dedicated Archanjo expert Prof. Calazans ('nothing was too much for this hardscrabble hero'<sup>394</sup>),

---

<sup>390</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 96.

<sup>391</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>392</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 99.

<sup>393</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 99.

<sup>394</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 99-100.

prove the rule, which is incarnated in the figure of local public relations guru Gastão Simas:

Simas was an efficient and serious worker, intelligent and imaginative. And yet, on the odd occasion that he allowed himself to indulge in self-critique, he was forced to note that this was not the career for which he had been born, not a world capable of exciting real passion in him. He found himself in it out of a mixture of necessity and vanity: it offered him good money and social prestige. [...] 'I'm too Bahian for this racket,' he admitted one day to a young staff member.<sup>395</sup>

Archanjo, meanwhile, had taken up writing not for any broad recognition or reward as such, but first and foremost 'for his lifelong friend Lídio and [his son] Tadeu'<sup>396</sup>, who assumes a kind of apprenticeship at the *Tenda* before going on to a bright engineering career in Rio. Amado describes Archanjo's emergence as a writer in the following terms:

When he started [his first] book [*A vida popular da Bahia*], the pedantic image of certain university professors and the echo of their racist theories infected his spirit and language, limiting the force and freedom of his writing. Gradually, however, as the pages and chapters went by, Archanjo started to forget about the professors and their theories, and became less interested in proving them wrong than in simply narrating Bahian life, the daily misery and wonder of a world poor in money but rich in trust, a people persecuted and punished but determined to survive and pass down the culture and freedom that had been bequeathed to them, not least in the form of song, dance, and artisanship from the slave quarters and *quilombos*.<sup>397</sup>

Beside the *Tenda* and his own writing, Archanjo takes up a lowly administrative position at the local Faculty of Medicine, approaching middle age with a subtly new sense of purpose:

---

<sup>395</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>396</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 121.

<sup>397</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 124.

His life up to that point had been a series of wild flings, samba parties, *afoxés* and *capoeira*, *candomblé* obligations, the pleasures of conversation, and above all the diligent servicing of women and their beds. Now, however, his anthropological curiosity had a higher purpose; [...] There had been an almost imperceptible but definite change within him, as if suddenly, with his fortieth birthday approaching, Archanjo had acquired a mature awareness of the world and a sense of his own life within it.<sup>398</sup>

Asked if this new determination to record the reality of his Bahian milieu was connected either to his role as a local spiritual leader or to his job at the Faculty of Medicine, Archanjo replies: 'Neither - it's an obligation to myself.'<sup>399</sup> Fausto, meanwhile, comes not even to care what distortions are made to Archanjo's legacy as long as his own name appears in lights:

I only wanted the play about him to be made with my name on it, with Ana Mercedes in the role of Rosa de Oxalá, the author and the starlet arm in arm on the glorious opening night! [...] At this point I wasn't bothered in the slightest whether Pedro's posthumous theatrical destiny was painted as union rabble-rouser, Black Panther racist or Bahian *mulato* civilisation-builder.<sup>400</sup>

Local censors, alas, ban the play<sup>401</sup>, but the Archanjo publicity train marches on: he even starts appearing in banal mass advertisements. Prof. Calazans is horrified at the 'profanation of Archanjo's name' in such ads, 'but that wasn't the worst of it: a well remunerated local essayist even perverted Archanjo's work to exalt aspects of colonial rule.'<sup>402</sup>

In his own lifetime, Archanjo had faced a different threat, namely the blind rage of a racist establishment class who saw in his celebration of Bahian 'miscegenation' a threat to their own cultural and economic

---

<sup>398</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 139.

<sup>399</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 139.

<sup>400</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 150-151.

<sup>401</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 151.

<sup>402</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 154.

hegemony, and who refused on principle to be compared as equals to a mere *bedel* or minor functionary - 'and a *mulato* at that!'<sup>403</sup> - of the Faculdade de Medicina. Archanjo's friend Prof. Silva Virajá takes aim at these dinosaurs ('my god, how is it possible that there are still people who don't see that talent is independent of pigmentation, titles and social standing?!'), but the dinosaurs remained well into the 20th Century:

'Keep your distance from those who worship the powerful and trample on the defenceless,' Virajá warned his students. 'They lack character and a sense of life's grandeur, and prefer petty lies instead. This *bedel* is a man of science, and could offer a lesson or two to many a professor here.'

[...] Shrugging his shoulders, Prof. Nilo Argolo took to his feet, a seething mass of prejudice and a monster of vanity, so full of himself and yet so empty. [...] Oh Nilo! When will you learn that only learning matters and lasts, and that it doesn't matter at all what language, colour or title it comes in? In the laboratory, the students eagerly surrounded Prof. Virajá, microscopes at the ready.<sup>404</sup>

If Archanjo cut his teeth on the likes of Argolo's prejudice, harnessing the professor's blind hatred for him into a kind of junky energy, his emergence as a mature author of lasting value took him above such vendettas:

It would take an unnecessarily long time to list all the authors and books that influenced Archanjo on his path from indignation to smiling transcendence, but it is worth noting a few. [...] He read friends and enemies, French, English, Italians, Germans, the American Boas, and particularly enjoyed the worldly humour of the likes of Voltaire. But there were plenty of Brazilian and Bahian authors in there too, from Alberto Torres to Evaristo de Morais, Manuel Bernardo Calmon du Pin e Almeida, João Batista de Sá Oliveira and Aurelino Leal, as well as many, many more. [...] He did not retreat from life into books, but found time for reading, research, happiness, parties and lovemaking, for all the

---

<sup>403</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 166.

<sup>404</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 167-168.

founts of his knowledge. [...] He refused to split himself into two or more selves with fixed timetables. [...] He was Archanjo-Ojuobá, a single and whole person. [...] After stumbling on an old edition of Gobineau's essay and some of Prof. Argolo's early work, Archanjo graduated from hatred to knowledge. His second book [*A influência africana nos costumes da Bahia*] was published in 1918, and despite his failing eyesight and the absence of Tadeu, on the eve of his fiftieth birthday he had never felt such health, such energy and confidence, such complete happiness.<sup>405</sup>

Returning to the *Tenda* to celebrate his graduation from university, Tadeu dances with his grandmother Majé Bassã, an immediate illustration of Amado's (and Archanjo's) epistemology:

Old beyond age, the sweet and fearsomely maternal Majé Bassã remained in perfect control of her elegant and complex dance steps. [...] It was a dance to rival the beginning of the world, replete with fear, ignorance, danger, combat, triumph, the intimacy of the gods. A human being, naked against unknown forces and full of enchanted courage, struggled for victory. This was how Majé Bassã danced for Tadeu at the *Tenda dos Milagres*, a crooked grandmother dancing for her grandson, a newly minted engineer. [...] In her immense bosom she welcomed all the boy's thoughts, emotions, ambition, doubt, pride, bitterness, love, all the good and less good in him, all the fibres of his young heart, and his future destiny: everything fit in the sea of this maternal bosom, which was big enough to contain all the grief and happiness in the world. The old woman and the young boy hugged, the former entrenched in the realm of the primordial mystery just as the latter was setting off in the boat of knowledge, in well-earned liberty.<sup>406</sup>

Tadeu, however, has already caught the same modern 'flame of ambition' as Fausto Pena fifty years later: 'I have to be someone,' Tadeu tells Archanjo as he leaves for his engineering career in Rio after an

---

<sup>405</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>406</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 178.

official graduation ceremony which captures the post-WW1 Brazilian *Zeitgeist*:

Prof. Tarquínio wished the new graduates success in their future lives and careers. There was a Brazil to educate and build, to free from its prejudices, outdated routines and political backwardness. There was a world out there, wounded by war, to be made anew. A grand and noble task, the responsibility of the young, and above all of engineers: after all, we were living in the century of machines, industry, technology, science, engineering. [...] A world of opportunity for all, under the *aegis* of technology. The workers in faraway mysterious Russia were even tearing down the old bastions of tyranny. [...] Lenin was still only the vague name for a distant socialist leader; the speaker had no idea of the historical significance of the man whose name he was suddenly pronouncing.<sup>407</sup>

For all the justified family pride at Tadeu's worldly 'success' - after all, Brazil needed talented and responsible engineers, and Tadeu would become one of those - Archanjo's dream was subtly different, and retained a healthy pre-modern, pre-marketing dimension. Amado switches to the first person in his narration here:

He wouldn't sell out his friend, not for a nickel, and not even for the inestimable currency of Rosa de Oxalá. I came from the *Tenda* and I have stayed here. If certain things have changed in me - and I don't doubt it - if certain values broke down and were replaced, if parts of my former being have died, I don't renounce any of what I ever was. [...] Everything I have lived adds together and remixes in my spirit. Lídio, Tadeu, [...] Damião, listen! I desire only one thing: to live, to understand life, to love people in general and individuals in particular.<sup>408</sup>

Fausto Pena, meanwhile, is driving Amado crazy with his continued 'philosophising about talent and success': in the end the author 'gets rid' of him as narrator - and 'not before time'<sup>409</sup> - but as a parting gesture he

---

<sup>407</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>408</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 222-223.

<sup>409</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, p. 257.

is allowed to present the problem that Amado has been trying to solve all along with his portrait of Archanjo:

It's obvious that talent and knowledge are not enough to guarantee recognition in arts, letters or sciences. The young man's struggle for fame is a fierce one, the path rugged. Is this a banal observation these days? No doubt. [...] To get any kind of applause, see his name in the papers, enjoy rare scraps of attention, a high price in compromise, hypocrisy and silence must be paid. Let's call all this what it is: *abject servility*. Who today refuses to play along? [...] In our industrial and electronic age, of space travel and urban guerrilla warfare, whoever is not awake to opportunity and ruthless about taking it, whoever does not throw herself into things boldly and shamelessly, is fucked. There is no getting away from it. [...] As for Pedro Archanjo, I will leave him here, in prison; there is no reason for me to accompany him further. What profit is there for me in narrating his final fifteen years [...] of misery?<sup>410</sup>

Asked by an 'illustrious professor' how he can reconcile his 'primitive' *candomblé* obligations with his obvious parallel commitment to modern science, Archanjo offers a timeless reply to Pena's opportunism:

'I have *mestiço* roots: I'm black and white at the same time. I was born into *candomblé*, grew up with *orixás* and took up an important post myself while I was still a boy. Do you know what *Ojuobá* means? I am the eyes of Xangô, my illustrious teacher. I have a commitment, a responsibility.'

Archanjo banged on the table. 'Another beer for the professor, *cachaça* for me. [...] For years I believed in my *orixás* the same way Friar Timothy believed in his saints, in Christ and the Virgin. At that stage, everything I knew came from the streets. Later, I drank from other founts of knowledge and gave up my old mode of faith. [...] But this hasn't stopped me from exercising my functions as *Ojuobá* and fulfilling my commitment. I'm not the type to worry about what others might think; [...] ancient people continue to live in me.'<sup>411</sup>

---

<sup>410</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 257-260.

<sup>411</sup> Amado, *Tenda dos Milagres*, pp. 245-247.

## 18. Pirandello: Real Lives

*Not even the recent passing of [Flaubert and Dostoyevsky's] dual bicentennial prompted scholarly reflection on their resemblances and dissimilarities, which says as much about academic overspecialization as it does about the two authors. [...] Dostoyevsky's approach, expressed through character, was psychological, even psycho-pathological. The [Flaubertian] narrator is dissolved into an ether-like consciousness. Internal dialogue and external events swirl and mix and blur in this fantastical psychic space, with the novel's characters speaking in a discordant chorus of voices—characters in search of a (unified) consciousness à la Pirandello. [...] Flaubert, with a patrician contempt drenched in sovereign irony, inveighed against not only bourgeois materialism but working-class vulgarity. Both classes, he believed, were enemies of art and lovers of mammon. [...] As for those with 'higher abilities', the 'gifted ones' who resist, Shigalev and Verkhovensky [in Dostoyevsky's The Demons] are the most ruthless [proto-Leninist] exponents of 'cancel culture' imaginable. Whoever and whatever is noble and cherished in civilization will be annihilated in the holocaust. As Verkhovensky proclaims, 'Cicero will have his tongue cut out, Copernicus will have his eyes gouged out, Shakespeare will be stoned—that's Shigalevism. Slaves must be equal.'<sup>412</sup>*

John G. Rodden

Fromm's conception of human equality, to be clear, is aspirational, not a levelling down to slavery: we might all realise our highest selves in the right conditions, so these conditions - social-psychological and sociological - really ought to be researched at universities and

---

<sup>412</sup> John G. Rodden, 'The Master of Petersburg and the Martyr of Style: Dostoevsky and Flaubert Should Be Studied Together as Progenitors of the Modern Novel', <https://www.americanpurpose.com/articles/the-master-of-petersburg-and-the-martyr-of-style/>, 11/2/2022 (accessed 19/2/2022).

implemented everywhere through political engagement. The role of individual 'fantasy'<sup>413</sup>, however, as Luigi Pirandello calls it in the Preface to his 1921 play *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, can never safely be overlooked, for it is both a cause and an effect of social-psychological health. Pirandello's Preface to his most famous work, indeed, is worth reading on its own, not only as an example of 'individual biophilic productivity' in dry Frommian parlance, but also as a reminder of social psychology's broader reliance on the arts: a house in which only Fromm's turgid voice could be heard would not be one in which he or any of his fans would wish to live.

'What author could ever say how and why a character comes into being in her imagination?'<sup>414</sup> Pirandello asks honestly, before describing the genesis of his own 'six characters':

The mystery of artistic creation is none other than that of any other birth in the natural world. A woman in love may wish to become a mother, but the desire alone, no matter how strong, is not sufficient. One fine day, however, she will find herself a mother without knowing exactly [which sperm] it was. The artist, likewise, welcomes so many seeds of life into herself that she could never say why, at a certain moment, one of these seeds lodges itself in her imagination and becomes a living creature on a plane of life beyond ephemeral daily concerns. [...] I have never been someone who could describe a person just for the sake of it; [...] some of us have a profound spiritual need which does not allow us to paint landscapes or portraits which are not imbued with a certain sense of life, and which thus acquire a universal value. [...] And yet] I loathe symbolic art, in which the depicted object loses all spontaneous movement of its own and becomes a mere vehicle or allegory. [...] The spiritual need I am describing cannot be satisfied by such allegorical symbolism. [...] Life is never given in vain to an imaginary character: these six products of my spirit had lives of their own, one which I [as their 'parent'] had no right to deny them.<sup>415</sup>

---

<sup>413</sup> Luigi Pirandello, 'Prefazione dell'autore', in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, (Milano: Rizzoli, 1993(1921)), p. 59.

<sup>414</sup> Pirandello, 'Prefazione dell'autore', p. 60.

<sup>415</sup> Pirandello, 'Prefazione dell'autore', pp. 60-61.

Something in the very authenticity of these characters' existence, contrasted with the sordid vanities of the modern theatre racket, makes them more 'real' and more 'universal' than the insufferably self-regarding actors expected to play them or the *Capocomico* paid to coordinate the actors on stage for a paying audience. As Pirandello admits in his Preface, these characters reflected his own anxieties about being reified and commercialised by a monstrous modern industry that had lost all contact with its ancient cathartic purpose:

The universal meaning I had sought in vain in these six characters suddenly crystallised in them as I saw them fighting desperately on stage with each other, and above all with the *Capocomico* and the actors who failed to understand them.

Each of the characters unwittingly expresses, in the throes of her own vehemence, that which for many years had represented the struggle of my own spirit. [...] Two of the characters in particular, the Father and the Stepdaughter, speak of the horrific fixity of their form, according to which they are eternally condemned to an immutable essentiality; [...] and yet they defend this identity against the fake and fickle actors and seek to impose their fixed vision of their own story on the *Capocomico*, who seeks at every opportunity to change it and adapt it to suit the so-called [commercial] demands of the theatre.<sup>416</sup>

There is a proto-psychoanalytic element in this process of Pirandellian self-discovery: it is only by allowing himself the freedom of semi-conscious 'fantasy' - what we might call 'free association' - that Pirandello arrives at this horizon of private reality beyond the distortions of tribe and marketplace:

The fact is that the play was conceived in a spontaneous illumination of fantasy, in which all the elements of spirit hummed together in divine harmony. No human brain working on the problem, however diligently, could ever have penetrated and satisfied the necessities of this particular form. The reasons that I might offer to explain the value of my creation are not to be understood as preconceived ideas that I now seek to defend, but

---

<sup>416</sup> Pirandello, 'Prefazione dell'autore', pp. 63-64.

merely as discoveries that I myself was able to make with my mind at rest.<sup>417</sup>

The relief or release of the individual from the blind throes of the worst of her modern socialisation - well symbolised here by the lying and jostling for attention of the actors and *Capocomico* - is thus made possible not by any political or ideological activity, but by the mere act of private fantasy: 'Every imaginary creature, every fictional character needs her own specific drama to exist,' or so we have always thought: 'What I have [sought to do] with these six is to welcome their being without worrying about their reason for being.'<sup>418</sup> While Pirandello admits that he has 'indeed given them a *raison d'être*, namely [...] the drama of being in search of their own author and permanently rejected', such a reason will never prove sufficient 'because we cannot believe that the only reason for our lives is to live in unjust and inexplicable torment.'<sup>419</sup> The existential space opened up by *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* is that of Kafka, Beckett and other 20th-century critics of the industrial, instrumental rationality which risks obscuring the very reason for material progress in the first place, namely to exit the cycle of 'unjust and inexplicable torment' which characterised the pre-industrial world, and for which an untenable literalist religion was the only industrial-scale solution. In its place, Pirandello offers an existentialist humanism in which an idealised theatre, more than a mere cog in the 'entertainment industry', becomes a home for the authentic cries of the alienated modern individual. Of his 'six characters', the Son is the logical extension or embodiment of this freedom from the 'vulgarity'<sup>420</sup> of the *Capocomico* who 'just wants to know how the story ends' so he can get on with producing the play and making money: 'The Son is the one character who rejects the idea of becoming a character in the play on stage. [...] He is the only one who really lives to the end "in search of an author,"'<sup>421</sup> because he is not to be satisfied by having his drama turned into a commodity; if the other characters crave recognition from a paying

---

<sup>417</sup> Pirandello, 'Prefazione dell'autore', pp. 64-65.

<sup>418</sup> Pirandello, 'Prefazione dell'autore', p. 65.

<sup>419</sup> Pirandello, 'Prefazione dell'autore', p. 66.

<sup>420</sup> Pirandello, 'Prefazione dell'autore', p. 73.

<sup>421</sup> Pirandello, 'Prefazione dell'autore', p. 72.

audience for their sufferings, the Son prefers to protect his own authenticity from such profanation.

The Mother, meanwhile, represents a pre-modern, 'pre-spiritual', animal-like or even plant-like humanity:

She is, in short, Nature itself: a fixed nature in the form of a mother. [...] Almost all my critics, instead of defining her as *disumano* as they did the other five, were kind enough to remark that finally - finally - a figure had emerged from my imagination who was *umanissima*. I explained this dubious praise to myself in the following terms: since my poor Mother was entirely bound up in her natural role as mother, a hunk of meat alive only in her procreative, lactating and caregiving functions and with no need to engage her own brain for independent purposes, she represented humanity in its highest and most perfect symbolic form. For nothing seems so superfluous [to a certain modern mind] as a spirit in a physical human organism.

These critics, however, failed in their praise to penetrate the poetic core of the Mother's role in the comedy. If she is 'typically human' then it is only because, deprived of any spiritual life of her own, she is unaware of being what she is, and uninterested in explaining her nature to herself.<sup>422</sup>

Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* is a sustained cry of one author - Pirandello - for a society in which the life of the individual spirit beyond social functionality might be sustained for all: the theatre ought to be a forum for such nourishing condensations and concentrations of reality, not a mere still-life reproduction of existing conditions in profitable synch with market demand. As Pirandello's *Capocomico* ironically complains, 'we are now reduced to putting on comedies by Pirandello; whoever understands him deserves a pat on the back, because his plays are all crafted on purpose to make sure that actors, audience and critics alike are never happy with them.'<sup>423</sup> What the *Capocomico* would like to be doing, in other words, is going through the motions of putting bums on seats, of following the time-honoured traditions 'of the old French comedies'<sup>424</sup>, of practising his presitigious, lucrative, '*nobilissima*

---

<sup>422</sup> Pirandello, 'Prefazione dell'autore', pp. 68-69.

<sup>423</sup> Pirandello, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 81.

<sup>424</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 81.

*professione*<sup>425</sup> instead of struggling with these interloping ‘characters’. The Father tries to reason with the *Capocomico* by arguing that the six characters are ‘less real perhaps, but truer!’<sup>426</sup> than certain existing people, as if the *Capocomico* were really interested in either truth or reality as opposed to convention, status and wealth. Even the Father’s loftiest utterances - ‘nature avails itself of human imagination to continue its work of creation on a higher plane’<sup>427</sup> - are interpreted in terms of their potential resale value onstage: the plight of the six characters is interesting to the *Capocomico* and onlooking actors in the manner of a fleeting circus act which might bring people to the theatre. The actors themselves, however, naturally expect to hang onto their high-status jobs and play the characters onstage: the very idea that the characters themselves might enact their own story more authentically (‘the drama is in us; it *is* us’<sup>428</sup>) is beside the point.

The plot (‘Father bought himself the right to lord it over all of us with those hundred lira that he was about to pay,’<sup>429</sup> as the Son complains) is itself a metaphor for the prostitution of the modern theatre to commercial interests: Pirandello may be worried at a deeper level about the difficulties of spiritual communion via language (as the Father’s monologues in particular attest<sup>430</sup>), but the Stepdaughter’s understandable revulsion at the Father’s ‘aspirations towards a solid moral hygiene’<sup>431</sup> is at least authentic and recognisable *emotion*; neither the actors nor the *Capocomico* show any trace of such direct feelings of love or hatred, as if their entire being is mediated through the ‘marketing mentality’ of the modern theatre (even the Father’s longwinded and guilty justifications for his behaviour<sup>432</sup> are a sign of ‘life’ in comparison).

---

<sup>425</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 85.

<sup>426</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 85.

<sup>427</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 85.

<sup>428</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 88.

<sup>429</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 92.

<sup>430</sup> See, for example, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 93: ‘We all have a world of things in us, each of us a world of things! How can we understand each other, good sir, if I attribute my own meaning and value to the words that I say, while the listener inevitably does the same? [...] We think we understand each other, but we will never understand each other!’

<sup>431</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 95.

<sup>432</sup> See *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, pp. 98, 100-101.

Fromm summons Pirandello directly to make his own point about 'herd identity' in modern market societies:

We have seen how doubts about self-identity began with the collapse of the medieval order, in which the individual occupied a fixed social position. The identity of the individual human being has been a central problem for modern philosophy since Descartes. Today we tend to take for granted that we are who we are. And yet doubts persist, and these may be aggravated by modern conditions. Pirandello offers expression to such feelings in his theatre. [...] Under the ever stronger influence of the market, self-understanding has evolved in the last couple of generations from 'I am what I own' to 'I am as you all wish me to be': The individual who lives in a modern market economy experiences herself as a commodity. [...] Pirandello has dramatised the self-doubt arising from this attitude in his work. [...] The individual 'I' becomes '*One, None and a Hundred Thousand*', as Pirandello called one of his novels. In place of a pre-modern and pre-individualistic tribal identity, a new, modern herd identity develops in which the experience of safe belonging is rooted in the [marketplace]. That such uniformity and conformity are often not recognised as such, and on the contrary are hidden under the guise of false individuality [offered by the market], does nothing to change the facts.<sup>433</sup>

The actors and *Capocomico* in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* really do bleat at each other (and the audience), even and especially as they express their own vanities (Giorgio De Lullo's 1965 film adaptation of Pirandello's play does a wonderful job of bringing this scared and status-conscious herd mentality of a threatened guild to hilarious life). The *Capocomico* may be able to 'assure' the Father that 'the whole thing really interests me' and that 'material for a great play'<sup>434</sup> lies behind the characters' suffering, but here too the spectre of instrumentality lurks: the *Capocomico* is too invested in his professional-cum-commercial role to smell anything other than profit. Expressing their visceral discomfort

---

<sup>433</sup> See Erich Fromm, *Gesamtausgabe*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1999), I p. 365, II p. 88, IV p. 48. The handy index in Vol. X of these Funk-edited Complete Works allowed me to locate three references by Fromm to Pirandello in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), *Man for Himself* (1947) and *The Sane Society* (1955). I have weaved these into a single quotation here.

<sup>434</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 103.

at seeing actors thrust by the *Capocomico* into roles they expected to play themselves, the characters are merely told to respect convention and let the pros do their jobs - and besides, the *Capocomico* insists, 'the make-up will take care of it.'<sup>435</sup>

The Father expresses what must be Pirandello's own subversive intentions: 'I think now I am beginning to sense why our author, who sees us in this form, didn't want to write us up for the stage. I don't want to offend your actors, God forbid! But if our author saw us represented like this...' <sup>436</sup> How, indeed, do you write a play which will depend for its eventual production on the very commercial theatre you are seeking to parody? At best, it is only by escaping into the meta-discourse of the Father, who worries out loud that any commercial actor called to play his role 'will play it as he feels me - if he feels me - and not as I feel to myself.'<sup>437</sup> By creating six characters who are (with the heroic exception of the Son) desperate to have their stories told (and therefore jealous of the details of the those stories), Pirandello succeeds in foregrounding his central theme: the 'reality' of art has more to do with the depth and quality of the characters who compose it than anything else. The *Capocomico* and his actors - who stand in for the majority of commercial 'actors' in every sphere of modern economic activity - will never produce art; Pirandello's six characters, meanwhile, 'have lives of their own' beyond anything the *Capocomico*, the actors and their alienated real-life ilk enjoy. Pirandello is in no way issuing a genocidal call to exterminate modern philistine victims of the marketing mentality, but rather extending an invitation to all those engaged in modern theatre to understand their activity from a fresh point of view: instead of the *Capocomico*'s blind authoritarian injunctions to 'respect the demands of the theatre'<sup>438</sup> at all costs, Pirandello is offering a path for an endangered art-form to rediscover its humanistic roots.

The *Capocomico*'s moral and epistemological relativism in the face of commercial demands ('truth, what truth?! - we're in the theatre business here: truth up to a certain point!<sup>439</sup>) must be opposed, Pirandello suggests, in principled and creative ways; his invention of 'six

---

<sup>435</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 111.

<sup>436</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 111.

<sup>437</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 112.

<sup>438</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 116.

<sup>439</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 125.

characters in search of an author' justly remains a key turn in the history of modern drama, confronted as it was and is with the encroachment of instrumental business logics. The Father once again ventriloquises for Pirandello when he insists to the *Capocomico* that 'a character, sir, can always ask a man who he is, because a character truly has a life of his own, written down by a real person for whom he is truly "someone". But a [modern] man - not you necessarily, but in general - may in fact be no one at all.'<sup>440</sup> The Father continues to chip away at the *Capocomico*'s brittle self-confidence, asking whether perhaps 'the good sir mistrusts his own reality'<sup>441</sup>; a true 'author', by contrast, enjoys a different relationship with the world:

When characters are truly alive, the author does nothing more than follow them in the words and gestures that they themselves propose. He needs to see them as they see themselves, otherwise he is in artistic trouble. When a character is born, she immediately acquires an independence from her author such that she can be imagined in a whole series of situations in which the author never thought of putting her. Sometimes she even acquires a meaning that the author never dreamed of giving her.<sup>442</sup>

This is a healthy warning to Pirandello's reader not to overrideologise his work: there is more to *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* than any explicitly Frommian angle. The characters' desperation for the attention of the stage is indeed to be understood as a parody of the average modern citizen's conscious and unconscious lust for fame, that harbinger of all good things, but it is also a comment on the nature of 'fantasy' itself: as the Father complains to the *Capocomico*, 'imagine the disgrace a character must feel to be born from the fantasy of an author who then sought to deny him life [on stage], and try to tell me that this character - left alive and yet without life - wouldn't be doing exactly what we are doing now [i.e. trying to persuade the *Capocomico* to put on their drama]'.<sup>443</sup> The independence and reality of fictional characters extends, in other words, to their right to hate their own parents - the very opposite

---

<sup>440</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 134.

<sup>441</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 134.

<sup>442</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 135.

<sup>443</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, pp. 135-136.

of an authoritarian arrangement. The Stepdaughter offers a perspective which may be closer to Pirandello's own intentions ('I think [our author's reluctance] had more to do with his disappointment or indignation at the state of modern theatre as the public typically experiences and desires it'<sup>444</sup>), but Pirandello himself is inviting us to a horizon where something more than his own intentions matter. This is in any case more than the *Capocomico* can see: his only concern at the end of the play, and as the characters disappear, is that 'these bloody interlopers have cost me a whole day! Who ever heard of such a thing?!'<sup>445</sup> 'Too late to get back to rehearsal now,' he tells his actors. 'See you all tonight!'<sup>446</sup>

---

<sup>444</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 136.

<sup>445</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 145.

<sup>446</sup> *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, p. 145.

## 19. Cán: Meaty Independence

*In 2014, Elizabeth Holmes gave a talk at a medical-themed TED conference about the technology that her company, Theranos, was using to make blood tests more efficient. By the time she appeared at TED, many inside the company already understood that the technology was not working as it was supposed to. And yet Holmes willingly got on stage and sold the story, and TED promoted it, further propelling Theranos to its peak \$10 billion valuation.*

*Of course, Holmes's fraud wasn't TED's fault, directly. But the public speaking platform's philosophy, which conflated telling a story about an idea with its realization, fostered a certain myopic self-belief in people like Holmes that they could create the world ex nihilo with willpower and well-crafted oratory alone. The TED philosophy encouraged boldness of vision, but also denial of reality. As such, it was a magnet for narcissistic, recognition-seeking characters and their Theranos-like projects.<sup>447</sup>*

Oscar Schwartz

Cán Xuě (1953-) is a pseudonym that will likely become familiar to global readers if and only if its owner, Deng Xiaohua, finally wins the Nobel Prize for her lifetime of world-weaving. Cán's short 2020 interview with *Zhongqingbao* magazine reflects a writerly patience with shallow questions that betray, alas, a merely instrumental interest in literature: the interview is taking place because Cán is relatively famous - and at least minimally acceptable to local authorities. With delicious economy, the author of *Wenrou de Bianzhigong: Can Xue Du Kaerweinuo yu Bohesi* (*The Gentle Business of Creation: Cán Xuě Reads Calvino and*

---

<sup>447</sup> Oscar Schwartz, 'What Was The TED Talk?', <https://www.thedriftmag.com/what-was-the-ted-talk/>, Issue 6, 2022 (accessed 27/2/2022).

Borges)<sup>448</sup> answers the questions put to her while politely refusing to stomach the tone, indicative of a broader 21st-century ‘social character’ with Chinese characteristics, in which they are asked.

Cán begins by exercising her subversive Baudelarian human right to self-contradiction. To the question ‘Some people regard your work as a form of spiritual autobiography; what do you say to this?’, Cán curtly replies: ‘My view of philosophy and literature has evolved in recent years. “Spiritual autobiography” is a term I once used to describe my own work; others have merely repeated it. These days I would refer instead to a vital process or harmonious integration of body and soul, a fleshier form of narration.’<sup>449</sup> The second question is openly ideological: ‘Your early work indicates a certain interest in modernist modes of expression, but also a keen desire to reflect on real social problems. How should contemporary literary works reflect reality?’<sup>450</sup> ‘My work,’ Cán replies, ‘is not in essence a reflection of reality or meditation on it. Although I take some of my material from this “reality”, I use it for my own purposes. I don’t believe the purpose of my type of experimental fiction is to *reflect* reality at all, but rather gradually to build up an individual and collective kingdom of life by breaking ever new ground. The dialectical materialism that regards reality as fixed is obsolete.’<sup>451</sup> A lot has been established in a few short sentences here, not least that Cán is not going to be told what to think by a *Zhongqingbao* interviewer presumably half her age. And yet there is nothing here that could be construed as directly objectionable by Party authorities. If Cán has successfully navigated the ‘grey zone’ of intellectual life in Communist China for nearly seventy years, producing screeds of her own autonomous literature under the close watch of the Mao, Deng, Jiang, Hu and Xi governments, then the ‘unwitting psychological shackles produced by years of self-censorship’ and described in *The New York Times* a decade ago by Louisa Lim and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom<sup>452</sup> may

---

<sup>448</sup> See Cán Xuě, *Wenrou de Bianzhigong: Cán Xuě Du Kaerweinuo yu Bohesi (The Gentle Business of Creation: Cán Xuě Reads Calvino and Borges)*, (Taiwan Biancheng Chubanshe, 2005). While many of her novels and short stories are placed firmly in Chinese settings, the Hunan-born Cán is also a proud lifelong student of foreign languages, literatures and philosophies.

<sup>449</sup> Cán Xuě, ‘*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*’ (‘Interview with *Zhongqingbao*’), [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_46eacfc90102z171.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46eacfc90102z171.html), 14/1/2020 (accessed 27/2/2022).

<sup>450</sup> See Cán, ‘*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*’.

<sup>451</sup> Cán, ‘*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*’.

<sup>452</sup> Louisa Lim and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, ‘The Gray Zone’, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/17/books/review/how-chinese-writers-elude-censors.html>, 15/6/2012 (accessed 27/2/2022).

not be quite as debilitating as eager critics of China might like to think. *Embodying* a certain intellectual freedom - transcending the realm of local politics altogether in one's own deepest engagement with life and the world - may be a more important *political* gesture in the long run than the 'cultural kamikaze'<sup>453</sup> route of openly criticising the government.

Asked further about what it means to be a 'female writer', Cán once again spurns the herd: 'The special characteristics of my womanhood are naturally important, and I'm happy to flaunt my feminine strengths when the time is right. But I'm an individual human being above all else.'<sup>454</sup> Keen to find out next when China will be No. 1 in World Literature, the interviewer asks Cán about the Nobel Prize and whether China has joined the 'top cohort' of world literary producers. Cán once again subverts expectations: Chinese interest in the Nobel Prize is not only a reflection of a national thirst for attention and recognition, but above all an indictment on national literary prizes and their inability to reward top talent. China may already be on a par with other nations, Cán says, but little of lasting value is currently being produced anywhere, 'not even within our own [Han] ethnic group.'<sup>455</sup> These are the sorts of walk-the-line answers that teasingly subvert the publisher's apparent midbrow patriotic expectations while remaining honest to herself and her closest readers; we are witnessing the short and simple steps of the expert tango dancer with nothing to prove to anyone, not the flashy rose-in-mouth stuff choreographed for mass global audiences.

Confronted with the 'young people don't read real literature anymore' chestnut, Cán admits that rapid technological change has had something to do with it, but she deliberately provokes *Zhongqingbao's* overwhelmingly young readership, calling for the youth to take a good long look at themselves: 'Young people these days are only getting lazier; they are not willing to engage their brains for anything that does not yield an immediate profit.'<sup>456</sup> But this presumably global phenomenon does not excuse older Chinese writers from a form of collective responsibility for the 'dispiriting state of our national literary scene. [...] Our writers for the most part are well-organised and well-

---

<sup>453</sup> See Lim and Wasserstrom, 'The Gray Zone'.

<sup>454</sup> Cán, '*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*'.

<sup>455</sup> Cán, '*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*'.

<sup>456</sup> Cán, '*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*'.

connected profiteers.<sup>457</sup> Far from representing an existential threat, the ‘marginalisation of genuine literature’ in the Internet Age - the lack of public and commercial interest it generates - is actually ‘a good thing’, Cán says, because it allows ‘true authors to rest their hearts far from the limelight’ and ‘enter deeply into their own investigations.’<sup>458</sup> Cán avoids the question how authors are meant to generate income to maintain their creative and spiritual freedom; it is, she reminds her audience, always peripheral to the business of literature itself. Her advice to young authors ‘born in the nineties and afterwards’ has nothing to do with self-marketing on social media and everything to do with the production of genuinely creative work: ‘Read the classics deeply, and study at least one foreign language.’<sup>459</sup> It is unclear whether Cán is referring to China, the wider world or both when she complains that ‘writers these days tend to toe the line and draw the benefits of conformity.’<sup>460</sup> The ‘absence of dissent’, whether from political authority and/or the will of the market, leads to a crushing ‘sameness of production’, a lack of ‘rich variety’ in literary life.<sup>461</sup>

Asked about the literary author’s ‘mission’, Cán replies that ‘the writer is just like the scientist or philosopher: she seeks to enrich and expand the human world. [...] But a writer’s work does not have a direct social function; it is enough for her to focus on her own craft.’<sup>462</sup> This freedom from hive functionality facilitates an autonomous productivity at odds with the modern industrial world: while writers will naturally seek ‘social progress’<sup>463</sup> - i.e. a positive effect on the hive - in their work, the precondition for such a contribution is a total liberation from the *compulsion* to contribute, and hence - crucially - a total freedom from the need for a paying audience. Responding to a final question about the need to ‘consider the reader’ in literary production, Cán offers her longest answer of all:

---

<sup>457</sup> Cán, ‘*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*’.

<sup>458</sup> Cán, ‘*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*’.

<sup>459</sup> Cán, ‘*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*’.

<sup>460</sup> Cán, ‘*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*’.

<sup>461</sup> See Cán, ‘*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*’.

<sup>462</sup> Cán, ‘*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*’.

<sup>463</sup> Cán, ‘*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*’.

When measuring the ‘success’ of a work, resonance with readers is naturally an important factor. But it’s complicated. A work which has no readers at all, now or in the future, is a failure in an important sense. At the same time, a work which enjoys a wide and enthusiastic readership today may promote all kinds of rotten pathologies; this is an even bigger failure. Works which cynically pander to the existing tastes of the majority cannot be said to be ‘successful’. It is much better to be producing work which may go unnoticed today, but which has the latent potential to attract future readers [through sheer literary force].<sup>464</sup>

After a stint in China documented in my too-long *Peking Eulogy* (2020), this turn to Erich Fromm and company was conceived as a drawing of breath before a probable return to the front, in some form or other, in the degenerating Cold War with Beijing and Moscow; all we have really sought to achieve in these short pages, here and in Chapter 9, is to make the quick but important point that China is a major front in Fromm’s unfinished reception story. The penning of the current chapter, moreover, has coincided with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022; the world trembles as the faultlines in this New Cold War begin to rupture. Read together, Fromm and Cán provide a fertile way of thinking about the ideological conflict emerging before our eyes: neither a nationalistic police state nor an unfettered free market with its pervasive marketing mentality and perverse rewards for narcissism offer the individual human being optimal freedom for biophilic productivity and creativity. Attempts to harness the best of both systems - both in the Sino-Russian sphere and in the post-Covid world of ‘surveillance capitalism’ at large - are also destined to failure from a humanistic point of view. The global republic of letters that Cán envisages combines a certain baseline bravery *vis-à-vis* economic hardship in the name of art with a culture broadly nurturing of the spiritual and material independence required for artistic ‘productivity’. One finds Cán’s liberal optimism - unfettered creative energies will feed back into the hive if allowed properly to flow - echoed in Fromm himself:

It is naturally tempting to speculate on the conditions which seem to enhance creative activity in dreams and certain psychotic states. [In my earlier work] I formulated the following hypothesis:

---

<sup>464</sup> Cán, ‘*Zhongqingbao de Fangtan*’.

during waking life, the organism finds itself primarily in survival mode - producing the material goods it needs for its survival and defending itself from myriad dangers. In other words, during waking life, human beings have to work, [...] and all work is rooted in cooperation. At night, we rest; in other words, we are free from all obligations to work and defend ourselves. But this also means that we are free from perceiving the world as it must be perceived in our working lives; we are no longer forced to accept the generally accepted, [...] and can perceive the world without the distortions of cliché and the social goals imposed upon us. We can see the world as we ourselves see it, and not as we are expected to see it in order to fit in and enjoy the survival advantages of group membership.<sup>465</sup>

---

<sup>465</sup> Erich Fromm, '*L'homme est-il paresseux par nature?*' ('Are Human Beings Lazy By Nature?'), trans. Suzanne Kadar and Judith Dupont, in *Le Coq Héron*, no. 183, December 2005 (1974), pp. 97-98. Beware my creative retranslation here.

## 20. Weil: Future Factory

*Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man traces the groggy awakening of a writer who has never thought systematically about politics. It is the beginning of a journey that ends with his embrace of democratic socialism. As Kurzke points out, Mann succumbs to the disease of nationalist resentment just before it becomes endemic in Germany. He effectively 'immunizes' himself against Hitlerism. [...] To the end of his life, Mann kept insisting that any attempt to separate the artistic from the political was a catastrophic delusion. His most succinct formulation came in a letter to Hermann Hesse, in 1945: "I believe that nothing living can avoid the political today. The refusal is also politics; one thereby advances the politics of the evil cause." If artists lose themselves in fantasies of independence, they become the tool of malefactors, who prefer to keep art apart from politics so that the work of oppression can continue undisturbed.*<sup>466</sup>

Alex Ross

Simone Weil (1909-1943), coiner of the phrase 'attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity', has herself enjoyed renewed and justified Anglosphere attention in recent years.<sup>467</sup> We focus rather narrowly here on her diagnosis of modern workplace alienation in the brand new essay collection *La condition ouvrière et autres textes* (Paris: Payot, 2022).

Weil's mystical and puritanical cures - immersion in manual labour as a kind of sacrament - are less persuasive than her wretched depictions of factory life in Paris in 1934-35:

What should I do? Keep my mouth shut and follow orders immediately. Go straight to the machine indicated.

---

<sup>466</sup> Alex Ross, 'Thomas Mann's Brush with Darkness', <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/24/thomas-manns-brush-with-darkness>, 17/1/2022 (accessed 1/3/2022).

<sup>467</sup> A good selection of recent English articles reflecting this burst of interest can be found at <https://aldaily.com/search/?q=Weil> (accessed 1/3/2021).

Unthreateningly execute the required movements. No sign of impatience. [...] Bad moods are all well and good for those in charge, but they are forbidden to those who must obey. [...] ‘I don’t have to explain myself to you.’ Should I kick up a stink? Then I might not find a new job anywhere. [...] Impossible to prevent myself feeling that my miserable salary was in fact conceived for a beggar. [...] Even now, years after the fact, I still have to pinch myself whenever any stranger addresses me without that brutal superior tone. [...] I was branded forever with the hot iron of slavery.<sup>468</sup>

The second-order stress, however, is even more insidious: ‘You’re hungry, but you have to satisfy the demands of people who can condemn you in an instant to more hunger still. [...] What else should one expect? There is no right to anything more. One is there to shut up and obey. One is in the world to shut up and obey.’<sup>469</sup>

The sheer insufficiency of the salary adds fear and stress of its own (‘pennies become an obsession, such that you can never forget your beholdenness to the factory’<sup>470</sup>), but Weil, like Fromm, points beyond the immediate hardships of overwork and underpayment to the spiritual costs of exploitation:

The slightest reprimand becomes the most awful humiliation, because one decides that one doesn’t have the liberty to respond. [...] If one complains that the work is too hard or the quota too high, one is callously reminded that hundreds of unemployed souls would be happy to have the job. [...] One is a replaceable unit in an anonymous workforce. One certainly doesn’t count; one barely even exists.

The coercion is pure: one must never do anything, on any level, that constitutes private initiative. Every gesture is, or ought to be, the straightforward execution of an order. [...] But as there are no whips or chains anywhere, one must provide them for oneself by constantly reminding oneself of the stakes in play. One would like to leave one’s spirit at the door, but that’s

---

<sup>468</sup> Simone Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes (The Plight of the Worker and Other Texts)*, (Paris: Payot, 2022), pp. 7-8, 15-19.

<sup>469</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 20.

<sup>470</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 21.

impossible; a constant effort must be made to keep it from screaming, [...] for there is a perpetual necessity not to displease the salary-givers. One is expected to respond to the most sadistic words without the slightest trace of discomfort, and with a helping of deference for good measure.<sup>471</sup>

These same dynamics apply, in principle, even to well-remunerated and physically undemanding jobs: as long as the employee (or indeed salesperson or business owner) sufficiently desires the promised income, then to the extent that equivalent income cannot quickly and easily be won elsewhere, she will learn to wear the abuse of those dangling the carrot. Following Homer, Weil argues that 'only the pressure of dire necessity' could lead a person to 'submit' to such slavery<sup>472</sup>; Fromm, meanwhile, saw the problem as a bourgeois as well as a proletarian one: the exact rewards for such 'submission' - meagre or massive - may always depend on one's social context, but post-industrial modernity has exponentially multiplied the potential bounties, thereby leading to a broad shift in dominant 'social character' towards a largely unconscious 'marketing mentality' which rewards submission to the will of others. The author of *Escape from Freedom* would have recognised the relevance of Weil's description of an industrial strike for his own psychoanalytic work: 'It was a joy to walk past our bosses with our heads held high. We finally stopped needing to struggle at every moment to retain our dignity in our own eyes by fighting off the almost invincible desire to submit with body and soul to our masters.'<sup>473</sup> If we can now see that the toll of such a constant struggle might not be wholly conscious (and that the struggle itself might be intensified by modern industrial conditions), then it is to diagnosticians like Weil and Fromm that we owe our gratitude.

Weil cannot imagine a future in which 'work' (understood in the negative sense as drudgery and submission to bosses) is completely abolished: an 'irreducible element of servitude',<sup>474</sup> she argues, is required to keep human society viable and individual human beings alive: 'One supplies an effort at the end of which, to all intents and purposes, one has no more than one had to begin with. Without this

---

<sup>471</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, pp. 23-25.

<sup>472</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 26.

<sup>473</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 30.

<sup>474</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 95.

effort, one would lose what one already has.’<sup>475</sup> The premodern working week - before the advent of substantial and sustained economic growth - could be conceived as just such an eternally recurring cycle: ‘The problem, however, is that if one necessarily finds oneself in the same position after a month, or a year, or twenty years of effort, then the resemblance to slavery is overpowering: one cannot desire anything beyond what one already has, nor orient one’s strivings towards any future good. One struggles for mere survival.’<sup>476</sup> In this life, ‘everything is a means’; ‘necessity is everywhere, goodness nowhere.’<sup>477</sup> Psychic ‘compensation’ is required for the ‘great moral inertia and physical force’ required to ‘tolerate such emptiness’:

This [compensation] may take the form of ambition - the desire for a change in social status for oneself or one’s offspring. Quick and violent pleasures are another outlet: the dream in the present rather than the future. [...] These, however, require money: one has to pay for the illusion of power, not least by dressing as if one didn’t have to work the next day. Revolution, meanwhile, is a form of ambition at the collective level, the mad dream of an ascension for all workers out of the plight of workerhood. While they may begin as a revolt against injustice, such movements often end in a form of worker imperialism analogous to the nationalistic imperialisms of bygone centuries.<sup>478</sup>

Weil does not believe that the ‘basic curse’ of work as necessary slaving for survival can ever be fully overcome; any revolution based on such a promise for the masses is hence ‘a lie’.<sup>479</sup> The most common human escape from a life of ‘means’ into ‘ends’, Weil argues, is ‘children to be raised’, though she warns that children who liberate themselves from their parents’ cycles of drudgery are ‘necessarily exceptional’; most will simply end up in their parents’ predicament.<sup>480</sup> Rather than seeking

---

<sup>475</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>476</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>477</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 98.

<sup>478</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 99.

<sup>479</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 100.

<sup>480</sup> See Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 102.

salvation in the Sabbath and its extension, Weil argues that 'Sunday is just the day that one wants to forget that the necessity of work is real'<sup>481</sup>; only by refashioning one's relationship with unavoidable slavery itself, Weil radically suggests, can the 'first condition of non-servile work'<sup>482</sup> be met:

There is only one thing that allows human nature to tolerate the orientation of the spirit towards that which *is* rather than that which could or will be: beauty. All that is beautiful is desired, but desired for what it already is. One looks into a starry sky and desires only the view one is already enjoying.

Since the common people are forced to channel their desires into that which they already possess, beauty is made for them, and they are made for beauty. Poetry is a luxury for other social classes. The working classes need poetry as much as they need bread. [...] The condition of the working classes is such that their hunger for finality, which constitutes the core of every human being, can only be satisfied by God.<sup>483</sup>

An enthusiastic reader of Weil<sup>484</sup>, Fromm understood her unique contribution to modern debates on freedom in slightly less fatalistic terms:

'Know thyself!' This ancient Greek maxim shows us where the roots of freedom are to be found. Self-knowledge has always implied a willingness to push one's own existing boundaries and attain a certain maturity: it has meant the business of becoming the person we have the potential to be.

When human beings began to reflect on their existential situation and eventually even to write about it - this curiously happened around the same time in India, China, Palestine and Greece - the common goal was to solve this puzzle of human life

---

<sup>481</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 99.

<sup>482</sup> 'Condition première d'un travail non servile' is the title of the final essay in *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, pp. 95-121.

<sup>483</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>484</sup> Fromm particularly liked Weil's necrophilic definition of violence as 'the readiness to turn human beings into corpses.' See Erich Fromm, *Gesamtwerke*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1981), vol. II p. 181, vol. V, p. 290, vol. XII, p. 306, vol. IX, p. 362.

and meaning. But is there an answer to this most important of all questions? Life appears full of contradictions, paradoxes, and suffering. On the other hand we have seen that the path to fulfilment of our being lies in the overcoming of our pains and passivities. 'Oppression', to quote Simone Weil, can be turned into 'freedom'.<sup>485</sup>

Weil also gets two honourable mentions in *The Art of Loving*: first in the context of 'neighbourly love' ('this is love between equals; but those who are equal with us are not the same'<sup>486</sup>); and second, decisively, here:

If our entire social and economic order is based on the idea of each seeking her own private advantage - if, in short, we allow only a baseline of legalistic fairness to temper our egoism - how can we hope to live in this society and *love* at the same time? Are we not required to give up all worldly possessions and live in abject poverty? Alongside Christian monks, writers like Leo Tolstoy, Albert Schweitzer and Simone Weil have asked this question and offered their own radical answers.<sup>487</sup>

Weil's answer is indeed extreme: although she advocates the humanistic education of the working classes (they should be 'bathed in an atmosphere of supernatural poetry' in order to help them overcome their 'often painful sense of intellectual inferiority'<sup>488</sup>), the purpose of such education is only ever 'the training of attention', which is 'the only faculty of spirit which grants us access to God.'<sup>489</sup> This is all beautiful stuff, and a direct religious corollary of the secular calls for a *formation du goût* or 'training of taste' made by 19th-century comparative literature scholars<sup>490</sup>, but Weil betrays her premodern (dare one say salafist?) resignation at the end:

---

<sup>485</sup> Fromm, *Gesamtwerke*, vol. IX, p. 384. This quote is retranslated from the Introduction to *The Nature of Man* (1968).

<sup>486</sup> Fromm, *Gesamtwerke*, vol. IX, p. 468.

<sup>487</sup> Fromm, *Gesamtwerke*, vol. IX, p. 517.

<sup>488</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 113.

<sup>489</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 114.

<sup>490</sup> I am grateful to my old Francophile teacher Álvaro Manuel Machado for stressing the importance of this concept among the early *comparatistes*.

Without a method which transforms schoolwork into preparation for a meeting with God in the middle of a geometry problem or Latin composition exercise, intellectual work is as servile as any other. Those who enjoy plenty of leisure have to push their intellectual faculties to the limit to reach the intuitive attention [necessary for access to God]. [...] But there is no such concern for those who arrive home knackered at the end of a long day: for these workers, the very work which produces their exhaustion, provided it can be transformed into poetry, is the path to intuitive attention.<sup>491</sup>

This sounds dangerously like an apology for the socio-economic *status quo*, and in an important way it is, for Weil does not want to accept that the fundamental structure of 'life-as-suffering' can be changed: only God purifies. Even if the 'development of another form of attention beyond all social obligation'<sup>492</sup> is vital for individual spiritual health, this is only insofar as it allows us to forge 'direct ties with God'<sup>493</sup>:

A certain subordination and uniformity are forms of suffering inscribed in the very essence of work; they are inseparable from the supernatural vocation proper to it. Nor do they degrade us as such; only that which is unnecessarily added to them is unfair and humiliating. Everything which prevents poetry from crystallising around these organic sufferings is a crime. [...] The worst attack, the one which constitutes a veritable atrocity against the spirit, [...] is the one on workers' attention waged by Taylorised modes of modern production, for they empty the soul of all other concerns besides speed and efficiency. Such work can never be transfigured into dialogue with God; it must be abolished.<sup>494</sup>

Weil assumes that 'the vocation of human beings is to achieve pure joy via suffering'<sup>495</sup>; Fromm, as we will finally see in a direct form after 20

---

<sup>491</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 115.

<sup>492</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 116.

<sup>493</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 116.

<sup>494</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, pp. 117, 120.

<sup>495</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, p. 121.

chapters of throat-clearing, takes a subtly different view - one might say more Jewish and less Christian, but ultimately such doctrinal differences matter less than the common bedrock of anti-authoritarian humanism they share:

Many terrible things would not happen if human beings were guided by pure self-interest alone. The real problem is that vanity lurks in them too. It is pleasurable to be surrounded by inferiors, and painful to watch these inferiors acquire rights, however limited, that establish a baseline of human equality. [...] The most urgent worry of many people situated at various rungs on the social ladder is how to keep their inferiors in their place. [...] Socialist internationalism must get more practical; [...] a certain levelling up of conditions for workers in different countries will be required, but the deeper threats to peace and prosperity are seldom tackled.<sup>496</sup>

---

<sup>496</sup> Weil, *La condition ouvrière et autres textes*, pp. 50, 52.

### **Part Three: Opening Remarks**

*[Because] airlines have shortened distances and electronic information and the Internet have progressed even further to make distance disappear, all places, all people, all things are simultaneous and contemporary. There is no 'tradition', nor any care to have one, hence no modernity that even stands in opposition to tradition.*<sup>497</sup>

Gan Yang

The sheer ubiquity of Erich Fromm, especially for a certain generation of central European intellectual among whose children I now live, has made me cautious about saying too much directly on *The Art of Loving*, *To Have or to Be* or any other Fromm bestseller; it seems as if almost everyone here grew up with these books in the home. Fromm is not quite Shakespeare or Goethe, but a certain anxiety of influence nevertheless prevails: he is not wildly familiar everywhere, but he is certainly familiar in these parts, so any new book about him really ought to try to say something from a wholly fresh angle. As I circled and picked at Fromm's 12-volume *Gesamtwerte* corpus, pondering how creatively to attack it, an English-language copy of Fromm's obscure 1922 doctoral dissertation landed on my desk courtesy of the Erich Fromm Stiftung. Rainer Funk's blurb drew me in:

Both Fromm's socio-psychological thinking and his humanism are already observable in his dissertation. Until now, these origins have received little acknowledgement in English-language Fromm research; with the present translation of the dissertation into English by Miranda Siegel - 100 years after it was written - this deficiency should finally be remedied. Fromm's [thesis] is an illuminating document for anyone who seriously studies Fromm's later writings and the sources of his thought.<sup>498</sup>

The reader is soon reminded of David Hume, John Stuart Mill and other prodigies who gallingly produced some of their best work in their early twenties. As Funk suggests, it's all already there, in a style owing partly

---

<sup>497</sup> Gan Yang, in Matthew Dean, 'Reading Leo Strauss in China', <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/leo-strauss-china>, 1/2/2022 (accessed 2/3/2022).

<sup>498</sup> Rainer Funk, in Erich Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, trans. Miranda Siegel, *Fromm Forum* 26/2022, (Erich Fromm Stiftung, 2022), p. 130.

to the quality of Siegel's translation and partly to a youthful exuberance that the later Fromm might have sought better to preserve.<sup>499</sup> In short, we will read *The Jewish Law* as a lively microcosm of the best of the whole body of work; those familiar with the later bestsellers can enjoy something new, and those discovering Fromm for the first time can follow on to *Escape from Freedom* and go from there.

As we have already intimated, it is the idea of the Sabbath on which Fromm creatively seizes in *The Jewish Law*. It would be an interesting academic exercise well beyond the scope of this broadbrush house portrait to measure the extent to which a 'universalising' or 'extending' of the Sabbath remains Fromm's central theme over the ensuing 50-plus years; at the very least, the Jewish Sabbath provides a helpful lens through which to view the humanist kaleidoscope of the subsequent Frommian output. As a sociology student writing under the supervision of Max Weber's brother Alfred<sup>500</sup>, Fromm is naturally interested in exploring the effect on Diaspora Judaism of 'the loss of state, territory, and a profane language'; somehow, Jews have survived 'as a unified and continuous group' by 'saturating the social body with the religious idea immanent to it.'<sup>501</sup> It is the biophilic core of this 'religious idea', namely the individual liberation offered by paradoxical adherence to the 'Jewish law', which Fromm seeks to trace from its original roots down to the present day by contrasting Karaism and Reform Judaism (bad) with Hasidism (good). Funk frames the dissertation in the following terms:

When it came to the formulation of Fromm's research question and the actual composition of his dissertation, [...] the strongest influence was undoubtedly his second Talmud teacher, Salman Baruch Rabinkow. Nearly every day between 1920 and 1925,

---

<sup>499</sup> See pp. 136-141 of *Peking Eulogy*, for instance, for a discussion of Mario Vargas Llosa's frank assessment of Karl Popper's literary credentials in *La llamada de la tribu* (2018). A similar case could be made for Fromm at his didactic and repetitive worst: he sacrifices the spontaneous formal flourish on the altar of theoretical content more often than is absolutely necessary. Needless to say, Fromm's writing in English also inevitably suffered, as Popper's did (and as my own writing in German definitely does), from the fact that he was not a native speaker (this also partly explains my decision to retranslate Fromm where possible). I would not, however, wish unduly to exaggerate the problem: Fromm belongs to the tiny cohort of émigré authors (Conrad, Nabokov and very few others) who have ever succeeded in writing well at all beyond their mother tongue.

<sup>500</sup> For more on the influence of Alfred Weber and others on the content of Fromm's dissertation, see Funk, in Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, pp. 128-132.

<sup>501</sup> Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, p. 6.

Fromm visited Rabinkow's apartment at Rahmengasse 34 [Heidelberg] not only to study the Talmud and Jewish history, but also to work through sociological and cultural-historical questions. Rabinkow sympathised with a more intellectual form of Hasidism, Chabad Hasidism, which was founded by Shneur Zalman in Lithuania at the end of the 18th century. But despite the influence of Rabinkow's personality and way of thinking on the dissertation's subject matter and realisation - which should not be underestimated - the work above all reflects the adoption of [sociological] terms and concepts devised by Alfred Weber.<sup>502</sup>

Fromm begins by contrasting the sociology of Judaism and Catholicism, with far-reaching consequences for his theories of freedom of equality:

Due to the independently existing [Jewish] ethnic body, 'religion' was relieved of the task that the Catholic Church, for instance, had to take on: namely, ensuring the preservation and expansion of the social group through which religion is sustained. In Judaism, the religious content alone does not have to create the social conditions that guarantee the preservation of a group. Rather, the continued existence of the group was ensured by the fact of its autonomous, consanguineous, and ethnic ties. No dogmatic teachings and no church were needed to ensure group behaviour. Religious content could by its very nature remain an individual category.<sup>503</sup>

The 'anti-dogmatic' Jewish Law, in short, was 'capable of safeguarding religious individuality'<sup>504</sup>; the whole purpose of Jewish education was to carve out a space in which individuals themselves could creatively redefine the meaning of the tradition passed down to them:

Throughout history, we observe repeatedly that when the most sacred contents are presented to the masses without veils, they gradually lose their sacredness and ultimately end up as platitudes found only in the mouths of the ignorant. It is only safe to utter the sacred at the moment of consecration or in the

---

<sup>502</sup> See Funk, in Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, p. 129.

<sup>503</sup> Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, p. 8.

<sup>504</sup> Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, p. 9.

privacy of intimate human communities. This is the deeper meaning of the Jewish prohibition of pronouncing the name of God. [...] The form protects the sacred content contained within it, but it also protects the individuality of the person filled with this content. It is true that language, insofar as it is the form in which a content is expressed, already allows the individuality of the individual a certain freedom to understand and recreate content as he alone can and must - but how much greater is the freedom when the unspoken content remains veiled in form! Only then can the individual shape this content entirely in accordance with his own particularity without [...] losing the connection with the people of his generation, with the people as a whole, and with the generations before him and after him; that is, the connection with history. [...] The form does not provide the content as such; it merely adumbrates it. The individual must fill it with content, and fill it again and again. He himself must create content, must be creative, must be an artist. The form educates people, educates a people to creativity. And only a creative people can live these forms meaningfully. When a people is not creative, then the system of forms becomes formalism. If the people no longer understand that the form is only a penultimate, the form becomes its own content - and new prophets must come to awaken it.<sup>505</sup>

This is the 'God Is Not Great' Judaism of Christopher Hitchens, a humanist remythologising of post-Axial spirituality fit for 20th- and 21st-century cosmopolitan purposes. Fromm could equally be talking about the Confucian *Dao* here:

The [Jewish] Law aims to create opportunities to reach the goal, but it is not itself the goal. It is, as the word *halacha* (from *haloch* = to go) indicates, a path. This also means that one can reach the knowledge of God without it; it is certainly not the goal itself. [...] The Law seeks to change the environment, not the people directly. This is arguably clearest in the Sabbath law. It is not prescribed in the law - which would be quite conceivable - what mood the Jew should be in on the Sabbath, what spirit should animate him, and what kind of joy and rest he should have. [...]

---

<sup>505</sup> Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, pp. 15-16.

The Law changes the environment of the Jew on the Sabbath: it radically separates him from the working-day world that otherwise surrounds him, and aims to give him the opportunity for inner creative peace. The Law seeks to change the environment in order to give man the opportunity to change himself.<sup>506</sup>

Fromm wishes to stress that this freedom for individual spirituality belongs equally to all members of the human community; this means that both the drudgery of the working week and the freedom of the Sabbath should in principle be fairly distributed:

Rabbinic Judaism rejects the idea that one class should work in order to enable another class to devote itself to culture. All are called to knowledge. The idea that God makes the whole people a people of prophets - which had already found its classical formulation in the Bible - runs through all Rabbinic Judaism. This also means that no one can escape the work that is necessary. [...] Although the individual may be capable of evil, the mass, the community, is sacred, because the people, by the fact of sharing what is most sacred, have a profound respect for one another. They also do not pass responsibility on to others; rather, their own responsibility is considerably strengthened by the presence of what is most sacred. [...] All are equal before [the Law]; it is the expression of a substantive democracy, not a formal one. Judaism rejects on principle a culture that is possible or designated exclusively for only one social class.<sup>507</sup>

And yet, as Fromm stresses in his vital dissertation excursus 'Work and Vocation in Rabbinic Judaism', there is a certain premodern or 'traditionalist' element to such economic thinking: whereas devotees of the 'Protestant ethic' imbue their day-jobs with transcendental meaning and thereby come to embody, on Max Weber's famous thesis, the 'spirit of capitalism', Fromm takes the *Sabbath* as the true fount of unalienated human 'productivity'. Fromm's quotation from the second volume of Salomon Funk's *Die Juden in Babylonien, 200-500* (1908) expresses the night-and-day difference: 'Rava was even forced to ask his students

---

<sup>506</sup> Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, p. 17.

<sup>507</sup> Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, pp. 16-17, 29.

[because of their thirst for knowledge] not to visit the house of learning during the months of Nisan and Tishrei, but to devote themselves to field work so they would not be tormented all year long by worries over food.<sup>508</sup> And yet the ideal of human freedom represented by the Sabbath stands:

Under the [Jewish Law], the Sabbath is far more than, and something completely different from, a day of not working. It is a day of maximum spiritual creative activity on the part of the individual. [...] The intention of releasing man from the bondage of the working-day world and giving him the opportunity for religious creation is expressed no less clearly in the law regarding the Sabbath year. It commands that every seventh year, the land be left uncultivated and the wildly growing crops be made available to the poor. Usually, the Sabbath year is viewed only from a social welfare and agricultural point of view. The function of the law of the Sabbath year, however, is that it intervenes in life for longer periods of time, only to commandeer a relatively large period of time entirely for religious creation.<sup>509</sup>

Fromm is exploring Jewish tradition from the privilege of a post-industrial modern economy built, or so it would seem, on the Protestant opposite of the traditional Abrahamic separation between work and prayer. Whereas the Sabbath and the imposition of other fixed rhythms of worship represent an 'active sanctification of the world' in which the individual 'is forced to interrupt his daily work, again and again, to "create" the mental attitude in which prayer is possible'<sup>510</sup>, the Puritan is constantly 'tormented' by a need to 'gain proof of the grace of God [...] in the haste of his daily work and in the success of his work. The work itself is the absolute commandment of God. It is sacred and becomes an end in itself. [As Max Weber writes], St. Paul's "he who will not work will not eat" holds unconditionally for everyone. Unwillingness to work is symptomatic of the lack of grace.'<sup>511</sup> Rather than trusting the spiritually self-cultivating individual to feed back into the community on her own responsible and productive terms, the 'spirit of capitalism' mandates

---

<sup>508</sup> See Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, p. 29.

<sup>509</sup> Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, p. 21.

<sup>510</sup> Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, p. 22.

<sup>511</sup> Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, p. 24.

both a concern for outward appearances of success ('marketing mentality') and a sacralisation of one's own nine-to-five (or nine-to-nine). For the Jewish ideal, meanwhile,

the supreme purpose of life is knowledge, and work is necessary for the preservation of life; it is a necessary evil. It must therefore be done only to meet needs, not to amass wealth. The business ethics of Judaism is - in the language of Max Weber - 'traditionalistic'. In the biblical telling of the expulsion from paradise, work is portrayed as a curse, while rest is the crowning glory and sanctification of work. The children of Israel are forbidden from collecting manna beyond their immediate needs. In the *Kohelet* [Book of Ecclesiastes] in particular, the favouring of economic traditionalism over Puritanism becomes clear. Here, we read that God gives the sinner 'the task to gather and to heap up' (Ecclesiastes 2:26) and that one handful with tranquillity is better than two handfuls with toil, etc. [...] It is also quite telling that the Jewish tradition, which otherwise counts with utmost precision every command contained or even mentioned in the Bible, has not included the phrase 'Six days you shall work!' among the commandments.<sup>512</sup>

Fromm does not seek a return to pre-industrial economic misery for the great mass of mankind here; he simply seeks to identify a form of free productivity beyond pathological 'devotion to vocational work, which is so irrational from the standpoint of eudaimonistic self-interest.'<sup>513</sup> By so doing, Fromm also hoped to undo the work of early 20th-century anti-Semites like Werner Sombart, who in *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* (1911) claimed to have established a firm link between Judaism and greed:

The overall unselfconscious appreciation for life in ancient Judaism is far removed from [...] the business ethics of medieval and modern Judaism, which played an important role in the development of the capitalist ethos. Specifically, this Judaism sided with the politically and speculatively oriented adventurous capitalism. Its ethos was that of 'pariah capitalism'. [...] Clearly,

---

<sup>512</sup> Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, pp. 25-27.

<sup>513</sup> Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, p. 32.

Sombart is concerned with proving the thoroughly traditionalistic character of Judaism and its inherent tendency to take pleasure in possession. But he disregards precisely what Max Weber considers typical of the 'spirit of capitalism': the time-is-money haste, the careerist ethic, the non-contemplation. [...] That [medieval European] Jews were involved primarily in monetary transactions was essentially due to the fact that they were all but denied any other professional options. [...] Many Rabbinic scholars, moreover, engaged in monetary transactions because this cost the least amount of time and thus left them leisure for study and prayer.<sup>514</sup>

This last sentence is crucial for understanding Fromm's economics: the goal of modern economic policy should be a shorter working week and a longer Sabbath for *everyone*, but this in no way means a return to feudal underdevelopment. Leisure is expensive: a future world culture without slaves will require a degree of material plenty unimaginable to our Axial Age ancestors. Even here, however, ancient Judaism provides an admirable model:

In the time of the Second Temple, there were no Hebrew slaves at all. When the celebration of the Jubilee became impossible after the destruction of the First Temple, it was no longer [legal] to buy or sell a Hebrew slave, even if for only six years. Herod had to sell the thieves into foreign slavery, because the sale of Hebrew slaves in Palestine was considered an unlawful act. Even the quasi-slavery that existed when the First Temple in Palestine was destroyed was later frowned upon.<sup>515</sup>

Fromm wants to avoid confusing means and ends in the 'American' fashion; the entire atmosphere or 'environment' of modern post-industrial society ought to be conducive to productive individual contemplation. This will not mean permanent inaction, only self-determined labour and rhythms; the radical Jewish separation between 'this-worldly' work and the 'otherworldly' business of the Sabbath simply helped to create the conditions in which modern selfhood - which

---

<sup>514</sup> See Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, pp. 23, 32. I have veered slightly from Siegel's translation here (in which the 'spirit of capitalism' is defined as 'the spirit of time is money, haste, professional ethics, non-contemplation').

<sup>515</sup> Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, pp. 30-31.

requires freedom from constant slavery and prescribed functionality within the tribe - could emerge. Fromm wagers that a gradual extension of the freedoms of the Sabbath over more and more of the week, far from leading to economic and social collapse, will actually be better - for society and the individuals composing it - than the consumerism, careerist self-help culture and brutal attention economy he began diagnosing a century ago. Though a certain 'right to laziness' must be preserved, human beings are not 'lazy by nature': given the right kind of humanistic education they will, like Plato's philosopher, return regularly to the cave of human society and seek to contribute in constructive ways. The challenge for a global democratic socialism is how to ensure this freedom from compulsory work for all, not only for an oligarchic few. Any purely drudgerous work that *must* still be done in our century of robots is to be shared equally - not, as it is now, simply dished out to the begging losers of a shout-the-loudest 'pariah globalisation'.

Such democratic socialism, in short, will require far more than *laissez-faire* cultural policy: modern humanistic education must shape the individual's 'environment' in such ways as to allow her to transcend all dogmatisms and formalisms - and thereby to define the development of her own personality without a trace of gratuitous exploitation from the tribe (e.g. from a modern business sector keen to turn her into a certain type of 'useful' worker in a 'knowledge economy'). Though the details of Fromm's academic thesis on the historical differences between Karaism, Reform Judaism and Hasidism will not interest us here, the following passages transcend their academic sociological context:

In contrast to dogmas, [healthy spiritual] formulations do not contain statements about God that must be believed. [...] Of course, every Jew and especially every spiritual leader of the people had his own individual worldview, and it is thus unsurprising that some [laid] claim to imposing theirs on the people. [...] But the call] to dogmatic professions of faith - with one exception perhaps - was only raised in the Middle Ages, and precisely for apologetic and political reasons in connection with the rejection of foreign religions and cultures. [...] It is extraordinarily significant that Karaism and the Reform movement wanted to abolish the Law. [...] The Law has the task of paving the way to the knowledge of God for every member of the people. It does not propose an 'inner-worldly asceticism', but rather an 'active sanctification of the world'. On what the

knowledge of God itself is supposed to be, the Law is silent: beyond the rather elementary belief in the uniqueness of God, nothing is formulated in the Law that is binding for the whole.<sup>516</sup>

Who among Fromm's psychoanalytic descendants could be said to be continuing this legacy of respect for tradition in the name of individual freedom? Sophie Ratcliffe identifies Adam Phillips, who like Fromm goes after

the pay-per-hour shrink—and, by association, the self-help author. For when 'help' is seen as a bookable commodity, it's clear that something vital has got lost at sea. [...] I read Phillips's early essay 'On Success', a compelling narrative that spoke vividly to me of the dangers of living life according to one kind of story, of the obsession with 'getting better', of the virtues of finding things difficult. 'It is particularly difficult,' Phillips writes, 'to entertain alternatives in a culture so bewitched both by the idea of success and by such a limited definition of what it entails. Because the idea of the enviable life has now replaced that of the good life, it may be difficult to hear, or listen to, the parts of our patients... that are not interested in success... We police ourselves with purposes.'

Known as 'Britain's foremost psychoanalytic writer', Phillips has written over 20 books—and in admitting that I have found much of his writing personally transformative, I risk sounding like one of those Insta-influencers promoting soap-free shampoo or facial yoga. To note that Phillips's way of looking at the world has changed mine for the better feels risky, too. [...] Nothing in [Phillips] feels as if it has been written with the idea of a "market" in mind.

[...] One of Phillips's concerns [is] to correct a historic oversimplification of his own vocation as a neoliberal luxury—as well as his critique of those who have framed the psychoanalytic project as one which can indeed help anyone to 'get better', or ahead. For in 'presenting the aims of psychoanalysis, their concepts of cure,' he asks, 'are analysts doing anything more than adding to the culture's image-repertoire of the good life... stocking the supermarket shelves with new products, new ideals

---

<sup>516</sup> Fromm, *The Jewish Law*, pp. 13, 22.

for ourselves?’ [...] Giving the side-eye, then, to the self-help shelf, *On Getting Better* works more like a pamphlet for unselfing —attempting an emphatic collective politics. Phillips’s writing has always been political. In 1996 he wrote, taking his lead from Erich Fromm, that to see ‘psychoanalysis as a refuge from politics’ is ‘a contradiction in terms.’ [...] ‘How can we talk differently about how we might want to change,’ Phillips writes, ‘knowing that all life is group life?’ Such a dialogue, he indicates, will be testing. [...] The texts he refers to in this essay—Algernon Sidney’s 17th-century *Discourses*, Calvin, *Paradise Lost*, set against Freud and Lacan—are complex as well as unforgiving. In this sense, the piece—‘Unsatisfying Pleasures’—lives up to its title. [...] Phillips’s politics have been marked by an abiding commitment to complexity. We must, he writes elsewhere, retain ‘a genuinely political and psychic vigilance in the face of the insidious violence of over-simplification.’ Reading this latest work requires, and elicits, that vigilance. [...] This] chimes with the volume’s send off—a reflection on the importance of resisting ‘dogmatic’ conclusions, via the work of William James and Diogenes. [...] As we end the book, it is hard to put aside our belief in some kind of economics of reading—that time merely spent will yield some sort of capital gain for the self. In keeping with this awkward, important, admonishing book, that exchange is held at bay. *On Getting Better* leaves you, instead, with a feeling of something half-grasped—a rediscovered coin in one’s pocket lining, just irritatingly out of reach. Getting the better of our instincts, Phillips teasingly elicits—and frustrates—that human desire for a hack or a tip, for things to pay off, for something to go on.<sup>517</sup>

---

<sup>517</sup> Sophie Ratcliffe, ‘The Complex Pleasures of Adam Phillips’, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/the-complex-pleasures-of-adam-phillips-psychoanalysis>, 3/3/2022 (accessed 6/3/2022).

## Epilogue: The Crystal Spirit

*On the title page of my paperback copy of Walden, an echo of a former self greets me. My name, written in loopy adolescent script, and the date: August 12, 1993. I was 17 when I bought the Vintage Books/Library of America edition at Waldenbooks in the Bridgewater Commons Mall, using proceeds from a summer job. [...] One late afternoon, I was sitting alone at home, working my way through the book, when my boyfriend stopped by unexpectedly. I couldn't have planned it better. I had wanted to be seen just so: dim room, puddle of light from a lamp, reading Thoreau.*

*So goes a story about the Transcendentalists and my world. Reading Thoreau signaled, for me, the kind of intellectual loftiness I desperately longed for as a child of the uncultured American suburbs. [...] The broad tenets that many of these writers outlined in the nineteenth century—a faith in the sacred divinity of the individual and a generally distrustful stance toward public institutions—continue to animate American life and belief systems. [...] While church membership cratered and splintered [between 1825 and 1850], Concordians were building other institutions that would uphold the emerging culture. [...] A well-regulated common school education, the committee averred, would 'qualify us for the greatest usefulness in the world' and 'the greatest possible happiness.' [...] Yet, the past continued to haunt Concord and its residents, unwilling as they were to face the cracked foundation of the American experiment they were eagerly pushing forward as Emersonian 'fanatics in freedom'. [...] As inventive and inspiring as Emerson and Thoreau often were, their zeal for 'individual freedom' has curdled into a socially destructive force.<sup>518</sup>*

Sarah Blackwood

---

<sup>518</sup> Sarah Blackwood, 'Emerson and Thoreau's Fanatical Freedom', <https://newrepublic.com/article/164828/emerson-thoreau-fanatical-freedom-transcendentalists>, 6/1/2022 (accessed 5/3/2022).

There are two big 20th-century names I am even more reluctant to tackle than Erich Fromm, and yet I know I have put them off long enough now; Fromm has in any case led me back to them, so this is as good a time as any to break the taboo. I also discovered Albert Camus's *Noces à Tipasa* as a suburban 17-year-old desperate for intellectual recognition; I read George Orwell's *Animal Farm* around the same time (in the late nineties), but it was Christopher Hitchens who showed me 'why Orwell matters', not in his 2002 book on Orwell, which I confess I have never read, but in those YouTube videos my generation got to enjoy for the first time in the mid-2000s. As with Fromm, any pretension to cover the overtrodden whole of Camus or Orwell just feels ridiculous, so I would rather extract the precious core of living humanism from two short texts instead: Camus's '*L'artiste et son temps*' (1954) and Orwell's 'Looking Back on the Spanish War' (1943). Consider these the after-dinner speeches at our imaginary party at Fromm's house.

Camus's lecture at the Associazione Culturale Italiana is concerned with the very survival of art - 'that strange liberty of creation'<sup>519</sup> - in a world grown hostile to it. A philosopher-friend, 'much too discrete to preach to anyone, and incapable of defending slavery', is pilloried by 'engaged' critics for daring to write about Laozi as the Chinese people 'liberated themselves from servitude' in 1949, as if this very act were tantamount to 'complicity with capitalism and an apology for the continued submission of the Asiatic masses.'<sup>520</sup> Whereas artists have previously enjoyed the freedom to dip in and out of politics and current events as they pleased, 'it seems there is no more voluntary engagement for artists, but rather a kind of compulsory military service. [...] We can see what art stands to lose from this constant obligation, not least the languid and divine liberty of future Mozarts.'<sup>521</sup> A society 'which offers abundant examples of its hatred of art', as Camus's 1950s Paris did, will only serve to 'discourage free creation by attacking its very source, which is the creator's own self-confidence.'<sup>522</sup> While suggesting that 'the irruption of the masses and their miserable condition'<sup>523</sup> into the

---

<sup>519</sup> Albert Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', in *De L'envers et l'endroit à L'Exil et le royaume*, New York: Laurel, 1963), p. 188.

<sup>520</sup> Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', p. 186.

<sup>521</sup> Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', p. 187.

<sup>522</sup> Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', pp. 188-189.

<sup>523</sup> Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', p. 189.

hearts and minds of modern intellectuals via Hugo, Dickens and the mass media might be one reason for the new *engagé* ethic, Camus implies another: in post-Enlightenment modernity, art needs a clear tribal *function* if it is to sit safe alongside science and technology. Without it, a certain guilt at one's own frivolity tends to emerge:

In 1954, this bad conscience is the rule [among artists]. Most are ashamed of themselves and their privileges, to the extent that they have any. They must respond above all to the question they can't stop asking themselves: is art today just a deceitful luxury? [...] If so, then they can only accept what the Saint-Simonians called 'socially useful art', which we will even more brutally call *l'art dirigé*. Such a disastrous conclusion, already accepted by broad swathes of the modern world, ought on its own to signal the gravity of the present discussion.<sup>524</sup>

Camus first concedes that, yes, much modern 'art' is indeed part of a profit and marketing machine 'whose song will always be the same':

In France, for instance, we have this 'Parisian literature' which we export along with our perfumes and *grande couture*. [...] What might real art today address? If it seeks to reach the majority, then entertainment value is the only measure. If it refuses to play the [commercial] game, meanwhile, then it risks only expressing this refusal. Such double nihilism leads in both cases to an art cut off from living reality. We live in a mercantile society; [...] no value is more abused today than liberty. [...] Such solemn nonsense has only been possible after a hundred years of an industrial mercantilism that considers freedom a right and not a duty, and that has not hesitated to evoke the principle of liberty in the service of oppression. It is hardly surprising that this society has not sought genuine liberation in art, but rather a trifling entertainment for its ruling classes - and, in carefully regulated cases, for those who do the real work.<sup>525</sup>

The refuge of 'art for art's sake' is dismissed on the one hand by Camus as 'entertainment for the isolated artist': such art 'is created in total

---

<sup>524</sup> Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', pp. 189-190.

<sup>525</sup> Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', pp. 190-191.

alienation from society and cut off from all living roots.'<sup>526</sup> The opposite problem, however, exists for the artist who actively covets an audience:

In our age, the critic is to the creator what the merchant is to the producer. The mercantile age witnesses the asphyxiating multiplication of unqualified commentators. [...] Millions of people feel that they know a certain great artist because they read somewhere that he keeps canaries or will never stay married longer than six months. [...] Newspaper critics are probably right to say that artists would never reach a broad public without them. Some may indeed make it to the limelight, but what a state they are in when they get there! Nothing can really be done about this; every artist who makes a special effort to become famous in our society should know that she herself will never be famous, but only an image of her that she may not recognise, and worse, that may one day kill the real artist in her.<sup>527</sup>

Camus identifies an even deeper danger, however, in the

[romantic idea of] the besieged poet in a mercantile society, which has hardened into the axiom that great artists can only ever succeed against the grain of the societies they live in. While it is legitimate to affirm that veritable artists cannot swim freely in the world of money, such an axiom becomes false when it extends to the idea that artists can only ever affirm themselves in total opposition to the *status quo*. Many artists today aspire to be hated, and have a bad conscience when they are not. Our society, naturally, is too tired or indifferent to pay attention to them most of the time. [...] But by rejecting everything, even their own artistic tradition, contemporary artists buy into the illusion that they can create their own rules; they end up mistaking themselves for God and thinking that they can create their own reality on their own [...] instead of cultivating the fecundity proper to true art, the goal of which is *rassembler*: to collect.<sup>528</sup>

---

<sup>526</sup> Camus, 'L'Artiste et son temps', pp. 191-192.

<sup>527</sup> Camus, 'L'Artiste et son temps', p. 192.

<sup>528</sup> Camus, 'L'Artiste et son temps', p. 193.

Such 'collection', however, does not mean 'talking about the pain and joy of all in language comprehensible to all'; while the ideal of a certain 'universal communication' is 'proper to all great artists', the idea that artists can 'approach this ideal and overcome all solitudes by an absolute submission to reality' is a non-starter: echoing Borges, Camus writes that

the result would be a film that would last a lifetime and could only be seen by spectators willing to sacrifice their entire lives to savour the details of the existence of another. Even then, however, the film would not be a realist one. For the reality of one person lies also in others who give her form, loved ones and extras whose lives would have to be filmed as well. [...] There is hence only one possible realist film, which is none other than the one projected constantly before us onto the screen of the world by an invisible projector. God, if He exists, is the only realist director.<sup>529</sup>

What artists need, then, is an independent 'principle of choice'<sup>530</sup> beyond socialist realism on the one hand and bourgeois conformity to market tastes on the other:

Art is neither the total refusal nor the total acceptance of what is. [...] The problem of art is not to decide whether to flee reality or to submit to it, but only what dose of reality is the correct one. [...] Each artist resolves this for herself as she can and must. [...] An artist can neither escape her time nor melt into it. If she wanders too far, she finds herself talking into the abyss. [...] The artist is always seeking, directly or indirectly, to see and experience the present, [...] not the relationship of this present to a future she cannot know. What I reproach among today's 'engaged' artists is their renunciation of the present in favour of future constructions.<sup>531</sup>

Camus doesn't want to 'die alone' in the 'irresponsibility' characteristic of '150 years of mercantile society': 'We 20th-century writers cannot evade

---

<sup>529</sup> Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', p. 195.

<sup>530</sup> Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', p. 195.

<sup>531</sup> Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', pp. 200-201.

the common misery of mankind; [...] we must speak where others cannot. But we must do it for all those living *now*, irrespective of past and future grandeurs.<sup>532</sup> This 'difficult liberty' of art requires a tightrope-walker's ability to balance over the 'twin abysses of frivolity and propaganda'<sup>533</sup>; the 'renaissance' for which Camus calls at the end of '*L'artiste et son temps*' will hence require a return to classical sources:

Art lives only from the constraints it imposes upon itself; it dies from all others. [...] As long as a society and its artists are unwilling to make this effort, as long as they let themselves wallow in the easy comforts of entertainment and conformism, [they] will remain stuck in the void. [...] There is no culture without heritage, and we cannot and must not turn our back on our own. Whatever the works of the future may look like, they will all be loaded with the same ancient secret, made of courage and liberty, and nourished by the audacity of thousands of artists from all centuries.<sup>534</sup>

Camus is in any case pleased that two World Wars have jolted a generation of Western artists out of bourgeois 'irresponsibility' and foregrounded global anti-colonial struggles:

Perhaps now, if we lend our ears, we will hear amid the din of empires the flap of wings, the sweet rustle of life and hope. Some will say that this hope is carried by a single people or person. I prefer to think of it as generated by millions of individual human beings going about their daily business in total disregard for borders and the coarse militarisation of history, protecting in themselves the ever-threatened truth they cultivate, in the soil of their own sufferings and joys, on behalf of everyone else.<sup>535</sup>

In *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell famously described the Spanish Civil War in just these world-historical terms ('one knew immediately that [the nascent Spanish Republic] was a state of affairs worth fighting for' etc.), but he also endured the misfortune of actually fighting in it:

---

<sup>532</sup> Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', p. 202.

<sup>533</sup> Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', p. 203.

<sup>534</sup> Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', pp. 204-205.

<sup>535</sup> Camus, '*L'Artiste et son temps*', pp. 206-207.

'Here we are, soldiers of a revolutionary army, defending Democracy against Fascism, fighting a war which is *about* something, and the detail of our lives is just as sordid and degrading as it could be in prison, let alone in a bourgeois army.' [...] The essential horror of army life (whoever has been a soldier will know what I mean by the essential horror of army life) is barely affected by the nature of the war you happen to be fighting in. Discipline, for instance, is ultimately the same in all armies. Orders have to be obeyed and enforced by punishment if necessary, the relationship of officer and man has to be the relationship of superior and inferior. [...] As far as the mass of people go, the extraordinary swings of opinion which occur nowadays, the emotions which can be turned on and off like a tap, are the result of newspaper and radio hypnosis. In the intelligentsia I should say they result rather from money and mere physical safety. At a given moment they may be 'pro-war' or 'anti-war', but in either case they have no realistic picture of war in their minds. When they enthused over the Spanish war, they knew, of course, that people were being killed and that to be killed is unpleasant, but they did feel that for a soldier in the Spanish Republican army the experience of war was somehow not degrading. Somehow the latrines stank less, discipline was less irksome. [...] We have become too civilised to grasp the obvious. For the truth is very simple. To survive you have to fight, and to fight you have to dirty yourself. War is evil, and it is often the lesser evil. [...] The fact that such a platitude is worth writing down shows what the years of *rentier* capitalism have done to us.<sup>536</sup>

Like Fromm, Orwell is setting up a stark opposition between the pre-industrial and post-industrial worlds: the 'money and mere physical safety' of privileged modern elites is now, for the first time in human history, within tantalising reach of the masses. The Industrial Revolution, however, made new forms of injustice and manipulation possible for this very reason; it is no coincidence that Orwell could write the following description of fascism just before he embarked on *1984*:

---

<sup>536</sup> George Orwell, 'Looking Back on the Spanish War' (1943), in *Homage to Catalonia*, (Penguin, 1974(1938)), pp. 225-227.

When one thinks of all the people who support or have supported Fascism, one stands amazed at their diversity. What a crew! [...] But the [common thread] is really very simple. They are all people with something to lose, or people who long for a hierarchical society and dread the prospect of a world of free and equal human beings. [...] Pétain attributes the fall of France to the common people's 'love of pleasure'. One sees this in its right perspective if one stops to wonder how much pleasure the ordinary French peasant's or working-man's life would contain compared with Pétain's own. The damned impertinence of these politicians, priests, literary men, and what-not who lecture the working-class socialist for his 'materialism'! All that the working man demands is what these others would consider the indispensable minimum without which human life cannot be lived at all. Enough to eat, freedom from the haunting terror of unemployment, the knowledge that your children will get a fair chance, a bath once a day, clean linen reasonably often, a roof that doesn't leak, and short enough working hours to leave you with a little energy when the day is done. Not one of those who preach against 'materialism' would consider life livable without these things. And how easily that minimum could be attained if we chose to set our minds to it for only twenty years! To raise the standard of living of the whole world to that of Britain would not be a greater undertaking than the war we have just fought. [...] The question is very simple. Shall people like that Italian soldier [I fought with in Spain] be allowed to live the decent, fully human life which is now technically achievable, or shan't they? Shall the common man be pushed back into the mud, or shall he not? I myself believe that the common man will win his fight sooner or later, but I want it to be sooner and not later - some time within the next hundred years, say, and not some time within the next ten thousand years. That was the real issue of the Spanish war, and of the last war, and perhaps of other wars yet to come.<sup>537</sup>

Orwell takes a particularly beautiful example of humanity - an Italian soldier, presumed dead, whose name he never learned - as a paradoxical symbol of the human equality for which he fought:

---

<sup>537</sup> 'Looking Back on the Spanish War', pp. 244-245.

When I remember - oh, how vividly! - his shabby uniform and fierce, pathetic, innocent face, the complex side-issues of the war seem to fade away and I see clearly that there was at any rate no doubt about who was in the right. In spite of power politics and journalistic lying, the central issue of the war was the attempt of people like this to win the decent life which they knew to be their birthright. [...] This man's face, which I saw only for a minute or two, remains with me as a sort of visual reminder of what the war was really about. [...] The thing I saw in your face / No power can disinherit; / No bomb that ever burst / Shatters the crystal spirit.<sup>538</sup>

It is a compliment indeed to suggest, as I would, that Fromm makes the link between unfreedom and inequality even more explicit than Orwell does. Without succumbing to the dangerous excitements of conspiratorial thinking, Fromm identifies a whole level of subconscious pressure on the modern individual to reject the notion of equality, or even the *possibility* of equal material dignity, through various layers of indoctrination for the ratrace of a global attention economy. Consider Orwell, one last time, in 'Looking Back on the Spanish War':

It is just this common basis of agreement, with its implication that human beings are all one species of animal, that totalitarianism destroys. Nazi theory indeed specifically denies that such a thing as 'the truth' exists. There is, for instance, no such thing as 'Science'. There is only 'German science', 'Jewish science' etc. [...] If the Leader says that two and two are five - well, two and two are five. This prospect frightens me much more than bombs - and after our experience of the last few years that is not a frivolous statement. [...] Who could have imagined twenty years ago that slavery would return to Europe? Well, slavery has been restored under our noses. The forced-labour camps all over Europe and North Africa where Poles, Russians, Jews and political prisoners of every race toil at road-making or swamp-draining for their bare rations, are simple chattel slavery. [...] There is no reason for thinking that this state of affairs will change while any totalitarian domination endures. We don't grasp its full implications, because in our mystical way we feel

---

<sup>538</sup> Orwell, 'Looking Back on the Spanish War', pp. 243-244, 247.

that a regime founded on slavery *must* collapse. But it is worth comparing the duration of the slave empires of antiquity with that of any modern state. Civilisations founded on slavery have lasted for such periods as four thousand years.

When I think of antiquity, the detail that frightens me is that those hundreds of millions of slaves on whose back civilisation rested have left behind them no record whatever. [...] There are only two slaves [Spartacus and Epictetus] whose names I know.<sup>539</sup>

It is hard not to think here of our billions of social media userpreneurs desperate for celebrity and its perceived advantages (at whatever cost to the truth); what more ingenious or ‘Orwellian’ form of slavery, what surer recipe for the anonymity of the slaves of old, than to offer everyone her own magic soapbox! Here is Fromm in his 1961 ‘Afterword to George Orwell’s *1984*’, which will serve as our own last word from him:

At the beginning of the industrial period, human beings found themselves full of hope, because in reality they had never lived in a world where the table could be laid for everyone; slavery, war and exploitation were economic givens until the possibilities unleashed by the natural sciences for the development of labour-saving modern technology became apparent. [...] Human beings *can* produce enough for all; war has become unnecessary insofar as technological progress within a country can outstrip the bounties of territorial invasion. [...] One cannot accuse [dystopian authors like Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell] of thinking that it is easy to destroy this natural hope of humanism, but they all come to the conclusion that it is possible with modern methods. [...] Alan Harrington offered a subtle and accurate picture of life in a large American company in his book *Life in the Crystal Palace* (1959). Harrington’s concept of ‘mobile truth’ could not be more contemporary. For anyone who works in a business that claims its products are the best, it is fast becoming irrelevant whether this is true or not. [...] If you take up a job with a competing firm, you internalise the new truth that *this* company’s products are the best. The destructive consequence for our societies lies in the fact that the individual worker is

---

<sup>539</sup> Orwell, ‘Looking Back on the Spanish War’, pp. 236-238.

reduced to an instrument [of power] and creates a private reality to suit her needs and functions. [...] The unconscious aspect of Orwellian Doublethink will tempt many readers of *1984* to believe that only the Russians and Chinese are victims to it, and that they themselves are immune. [...] But Doublethink is alive and well among us; it is not some future or foreign nightmare. [...] Although Orwell takes special aim at Russian communism's perversion of the socialist ideal, we too imagine our own societies as havens of initiative, individual freedom and idealism. In reality these are empty words. We live in a highly centralised, managerialised, bureaucratised, industrial society whose blind materialism is only offset by the odd spiritual or religious impulse. [Orwell] seeks above all to warn us how our future might look if we cannot revitalise the spirit of humanism and the individual dignity that our cultural tradition offers.<sup>540</sup>

Rainer Funk wants Fromm's endangered social-psychoanalytic 'method' to be preserved in academic institutions that have largely turned their back on it in recent decades. I would settle for a less formal result: may Erich Fromm continue to be read - yes, actually read - alongside Camus, Orwell and the other invited guests in this book as one of the great humanist authors of the previous century. His relevance for our own time should be too obvious to require restating again; we have been making this cumulative case in multiple ways and with a variety of contemporary epigraphs. I may have said something new about Fromm by accident here - the scholars who have read everything will decide whether I have - but I hope above all to have persuaded the reader that my being forced (or at least strongly encouraged) by fate to engage with him in recent months was a pleasure as well as a duty. I have tasted the freedom Fromm is selling: in the last six months I have enjoyed, for most (though not all) of my working week, a prolonged Sabbath or paid 'sabbatical' to write this book. In any case, worries about money have finally subsided as a regular Western middle-class salary lands in my bank account on the back of a permanent job contract that I would have to try fairly hard to lose, and in the context of which I was encouraged to 'write a book about Erich Fromm' with no real interference whatsoever. I am acutely aware, and can say roughly down to a couple of bucks a day, where the line between material comfort and material insecurity lies for me

---

<sup>540</sup> Erich Fromm, 'Nachwort zu George Orwell, 1984', in *Gesamtwerke*, vol V, pp. 287-293.

personally, and I know that this line is above the current global mean GDP *per capita* adjusted for purchasing power parity: let no one confuse this seeming leftist screed with a *plaidoyer* for anything other than the sustained global economic growth I believe we still need for Fromm's 'sane society' to emerge. Despite the obvious risks of nuclear and climate self-annihilation with which we all now live, the possible time horizon for this necessary economic growth is much closer to Orwell's one hundred years than the ten thousand he feared: a doubling or tripling of current global GDP, fairly distributed, would do it. The fate of humanity in our century may be decided above all by the haste of technical innovation in key natural-scientific areas, but the ideal of limitless material growth is crucially incompatible with anti-totalitarian politics. Humanistic economists like the winner of the 2021 Erich Fromm Prize, Maja Göpel, are slowly beginning to grasp this deep non-linearity of wealth: what matters for a humanistic economics is to generate and allocate resources fairly for the freedom and creativity of the Sabbath. Out of this very Sabbath haven, the desire grows to contribute to others' freedom rather than to pile away resources in a frenetic and endless quest to escape our mortal condition or distract ourselves with displays of status: 'The major problem of our time is the decay of the belief in personal immortality,' Orwell writes, suddenly and unexpectedly, in 'Looking Back on the Spanish War', 'and it cannot be dealt with while the average human being is either drudging like an ox or shivering in fear of the secret police.'<sup>541</sup> Fromm, in his own way, sees even further: it can't be dealt with until the world's middle classes - people like me and you, leisured English-speaking reader whose money and praise I don't quite need - draw a line in the sand of their own accumulation and learn to spend the rest of their time on more important spiritual business. 'Personal immortality' may be a quaint way of phrasing it, but one understands what Orwell means: not the cowering literalism of old, but a self-renewing sense of trust in our return to the minerals that can only be forged, day to day, in the cauldron of life itself.

---

<sup>541</sup> Orwell, 'Looking Back on the Spanish War', p. 245.