



Existenz

Volume 15, No 2, Fall 2020

ISSN 1932-1066

The Reinstatement of the Vague Anti-Totalitarian and Literary Reverie

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Abstract: Mattias Desmet is an author with whom the present writer shares overlapping interests and themes albeit contrasting sensibilities and means of pursuit. In my sympathetic response to his book, I point especially to the place of the broader humanities in evoking what may be called a "literary psychology." Such a collage-like approach is essayistic rather than didactic, with considerations of literature and art oftentimes disclosing profoundly insightful, eloquent, ironical, even humorous reveries upon freedom and cooptation: the vagaries of human nature and being during a menacing moment in world history.

Keywords: Arendt, Hannah; Benjamin, Walter; Kafka, Franz; James, William; Melville, Herman; May, Rollo; Fromm-Reichmann, Frieda; Camus, Albert; Desmet, Mattias; *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*; anxiety; literature; mythology.

Similar to Hannah Arendt's suggestion in her essay on Walter Benjamin, my thoughts are commentary, perhaps, as much as critique concerning a book and an author where I find a certain simpatico inspiration as well as overlapping interests and themes. This free-spirited response of an Other is an attempt to elicit further nuance and dimension. "Only in the chorus," muses Kafka in his notebooks, "there may be a certain truth."¹

Arendt, Benjamin, and Kafka: "Poetic Thinking," Art as Dissonance, Artist as Dissident

Shortly after the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States several years back, I wrote an essay

entitled "The Angel of History." It began like this:

Contemplating a painting he had purchased by the Swiss modern artist Paul Klee...Walter Benjamin wrote down these foreboding words:²

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels

¹ Franz Kafka, "Fragments from Notebooks and Loose Pages," in *Dearest Father: Stories and other Writings*, transl. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins, New York, NY: Schocken Books 1954, p. 308.

² Ed Mendelowitz, "The Angel of History," *Society for Humanistic Psychology Newsletter* (December 2016).

him into the future to which his back is turned,
while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.
This storm is what we call progress.³

Some years before Benjamin set down this dystopic vision, Kafka wrote, resonantly, in his diary:

I have been forty years wandering from Canaan...
It is indeed a kind of Wandering in the Wilderness in reverse.⁴

In this manner, the Czech seer ponders a post-paradisiacal, post-Canaan/canonical world, those looming capitalizations of "Wandering" and "Wilderness," a kind of gnostic shorthand disclosing an urgency concerning what is at stake. Such "wandering in reverse"—emblematic, broadly, of modernist experience and art, or of "losing one place without gaining another," as Zadie Smith put it,⁵ perceptively, in an essay concerning Kafka—is of a piece with Klee's evocative painting no less than Benjamin's disturbing epiphany. "Not castration," observes Rollo May, "but *ostracism*."⁶

Benjamin, during the course of a foreshortened life, would come increasingly to an understanding of Kafka as the modernist prophet who had, above all others, "mapped out the spiritual territory of the modern condition." Benjamin sensed in Klee's painting the essence of what Kafka, too, spent his life contemplating, namely a longing for paradise, revelation, biblical Canaan, and the gathering storm humans mistake for progress.

Enter a brave new world from which God has departed, leaving in Her or His or Whomever's stead manifold truncations in which nothing completely adds up. Kafka, explorer of a vast new space of a world on the lam and the mortified mind, sheds light on dark truths that science, it is quite true, like all other things, cannot wholly illumine. Unlike the academics, Kafka is reverential, even penitent—like some latter-day, literary Darwin—before the gravity of his ordeal.

³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York, NY: Schocken Books 1985, pp. 257-8.

⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1914–1923*, ed. Max Brod, New York, NY: Schocken Books 1988, pp. 213-4.

⁵ Zadie Smith, "F. Kafka, Everyman," *The New York Review* 55/12 (July 17, 2008), 12, 14-17.

⁶ Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth*, New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company 1991, p. 81.

While realizing that the past may never have been exactly what is being recalled, Kafka bears witness to a desolate landscape with a countenance of awe and dread. "Kafka," sighs the Italian critic Pietro Citati, "the man who has taught us to coexist with the death of the gods."⁷

Benjamin used his painting as a mandala of sorts, an object for focus and reverie. Following his suicide (after being turned back at the Spanish border while attempting to flee Germany's occupation of France), the painting joined Benjamin's friend and Jewish mysticism scholar Gershom Scholem in Jerusalem where it remained until Scholem's own death many years hence. Professor Desmet's whipping post would seem to be the Enlightenment (albeit, he suggests, significantly unenlightened) science, particularly as it concerns Covid and the various mandates that have grown up around its containment. I tend to see the problem as one of history and human anxiety and nature for better and worse—the storms we keep mistaking as progress.

The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes

In his *Principles of Psychology*, William James makes a startling pronouncement:

It is, in short, the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention.⁸

James's textbook is a testament not only to the place of science but, also, its limitations and conundrums. He observes in "The Will to Believe":

In the great boarding-house of nature, the cakes and... butter and...syrup seldom come out...even and leave the plates...clean. Indeed, we should view them with scientific suspicion if they did.⁹

The Czech novelist Milan Kundera, James's psycho-spiritual compatriot in certain respects, speaks on behalf of the art of the novel, particularly, and what

⁷ Pietro Citati, *Kafka*, transl. Raymond Rosenthal, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf 1990, p. 171.

⁸ William James, *The Principles of Psychology, Volume 1*, New York: Dover Publications 1950, p. 254. [Henceforth cited as *PP*]

⁹ William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York, NY: Longmans, Green and Co. 1927, pp. 1-31, here p. 22.

human obsessions with systems and certainty often leave blithely behind:

As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the image and model of that world.

To take, with Descartes, the *thinking self* as the basis of everything, and thus to face the universe alone, is to adopt an attitude that Hegel was right to call heroic.

To take, with Cervantes, the world as ambiguity, to be obliged to face not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths (truths embodied in *imaginary selves* called characters), to have as one's only certainty the *wisdom of uncertainty*, requires no less courage.¹⁰

And, so, there is a Jamesean pluralism in the midst of the "big blooming buzzing confusion" (PP 488), of "the vague and inarticulate."¹¹ For James, observes William Gavin, "the text is never finished; closure is always deferred."¹²

Chronometricals and Horologicals

Herman Melville's book *Pierre or the Ambiguities* is felt by many to be one of the great psychological novels of the nineteenth century. Pierre, Melville's restless protagonist, searches indefatigably for a guide and a path and envies the true believer for whom faith is fixed and knowledge is settled. He, too, seeks those "indestructible anchors" that bind the believer to "firm Faith's rock," a doctrine that can be embraced with all of one's being such that the heart cries out at last, "This is of God!"¹³

¹⁰ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, transl. Linda Asher, New York, NY: Harper & Row, p. 6.

¹¹ William James, *Psychology: Briefer Course*, New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company 1892, p. 165. [Henceforth cited as *PBC*]

¹² William J. Gavin, *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press 1992, p. 10.

¹³ Herman Melville, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*, New York, NY, Grove Press 1957, pp. 285, 289. [Henceforth cited as *PA*]

But Pierre—where could *he* find the Church, the monument, the Bible, which unequivocally said to him—"Go on; thou art in the Right; I endorse thee all over; go on." [*PA* 285]

Pierre, in short, seeks the "Talismanic Secret," a thing that for a psychological genius such as Melville, or James, can never be found: the atomized pilgrim in search of totality. As Nietzsche observes, the greatest spirits are skeptics. Melville is a worshipper of the void and mystery and would leave it at that were he not himself so brilliantly gifted in the use of language and the arrangement of words. Like Samuel Beckett (another lifelong crusader for stillness and respite from voices), he seems never able to be done with them:

That profound Silence, that only Voice of our God... from that divine thing without a name, those impostor philosophers pretend somehow to have got an answer; which is as absurd, as though they should say they had got water out of stone, for how can a man get a Voice out of Silence? [*PA* 290]

Melville took keen interest in science while being, also, profoundly discerning of its limits. "Science lights," he had mused, "but cannot warm."¹⁴

Hannah Arendt's embrace of Plurality, Kafka's "Chorus" of Lies

Profusion, not economy, might after all be reality's key-note.¹⁵
William James, *Pragmatism*

Art Spiegelman (whose graphic novel *Maus* has been recently banned by the Tennessee Board of Education) once observed that Philip K. Dick was the Kafka of the latter half of the twentieth century. Yet Dick was someone who looked back as much as forward and has been placed, correctly I think, within the gnostic traditions of Christianity. His life's work, he had written, consisted in reveries upon two themes: the nature, respectively, of reality and of authenticity. In an essay entitled "How to Build a Universe that Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later," the author holds

¹⁴ Herman Melville, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, ed. Walter E. Bezanson, New York, NY: Hendricks House 1960, Part II, The Wilderness, Canto xxxi The Inscription, line 55, p. 250.

¹⁵ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Way for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, New York, NY: Longmans, Green and Company 1907, p. 191.

his own with the most self-impressed articulators of postmodern mayhem as he laments an artificial landscape of "spurious realities" while imagining, longingly, the arrival of "fake fakes" who might actually be real and, thus, take their stand against the charade:

I consider that the matter of defining what is real... is a serious topic...And in there somewhere is the other topic, the definition of the authentic human. Because the bombardment of pseudorealities begins to produce inauthentic humans very quickly, spurious humans—as fake as the data pressing at them from all sides. My two topics are really one topic, they unite at this point. Fake realities will create fake humans... fake humans will generate fake realities and then sell them to other humans, turning them, eventually, into forgeries of themselves...So we wind up with fake humans inventing fake realities and then peddling them to other fake humans. It is just a very large version of Disneyland. You can have the Pirate Ride or the Lincoln Simulacrum or Mr. Toad's Wild Ride—you can have all of them, but none is true.¹⁶

Here is an excerpt of one of my client's dream-fragments:

Basically, the dream was about a robot that looked human and took my place in the world. I don't remember the plot, just that it took over for me and no one could tell I was gone.¹⁷

The filmic version, of course, is called *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), but this perceptive client is dreaming about something that, if humans are not careful, could become their collective nightmare as well. The aliens came with social media accounts and designer apparel; no one could tell that the human beings were gone.

With Taoist intuition, Dick discerns genuineness in negative terms and in smallness:

The authentic human being is one of us who instinctively knows what he should not do...and... will balk at doing it. He will refuse to do it, even if

¹⁶ Philip K. Dick, "How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later (1978, 1985)," in *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick: Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings*, ed. Lawrence Sutin, New York, NY: Vintage Books 1995, pp. 259-80, here pp. 261, 263-4. [Henceforth cited as BU]

¹⁷ Ed Mendelowitz, *Ethics and Lao-Tzu: Intimations of Character*, Colorado Springs, CO: University of the Rockies Press 2001, p. 41.

this brings down dread consequences to him and to those whom he loves. This, to me, is the ultimately heroic trait of ordinary people; they say no to the tyrant and they calmly take the consequence of this resistance. Their deeds may be small and almost always unnoticed, unmarked by history. Their names are not remembered, nor did [they] expect [them] to be remembered. I see their authenticity in an odd way: not in their willingness to perform great heroic deeds but in their quiet refusals...they cannot be compelled to be what they are not. [BU 278-9]

Psychologists would do well to recall those troubling studies by Stanley Milgram about too many people who turn up the voltage and look away from the pain, experiments that should have reminded one only of what was already surmised: about the many and the few and the just and forlorn—and, even still, proverbially, "the still, small voice," and Kafka's attendance upon grace.

The Voice of the Moon

In Federico Fellini's final film, *The Voice of the Moon* (*La Voce Della Luna*, 1990), its title taken from a poem by the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi, Fellini returns to the once tranquil countryside of his youth only to be besieged by an onslaught of television commercials, raucous rock music, outrageous beauty pageants, the Church become spectacle—each an ominous intimation of a looming, subterranean fascism. Everywhere one could witness what Nietzsche had called cultural philistinism—the infernal uproar of the modern world where relentless advertisements and beeping satellites overwhelm all poetry, silence, and beauty. ("What am I doing here? Why was I put here in the first place?" the audience overhears someone say.) It is not hard to understand the existential lostness this bystander is feeling.) Even the moon (whose capture the townspeople attempt to orchestrate in an over-the-top display of bankrupt human ingenuity) assumes a woman's visage and voice. She mocks the protagonist, Ivo, for his search for substance in a vapid world before, herself, pausing for a commercial! Ivo, recently released from a mental asylum, is obsessed with a woman in whom he imagines, absurdly, a projected love object, a would-be paragon of virtue and purity. He hears strange voices emanating from the depths of wells on the outskirts of town, far away from the madding villagers. Yet, as Melville had forewarned, how does one get a Voice out of Silence?

Fellini once joked that when it came to politics, he was more Eskimo than Italian. Lina Wertmüller, once upon a time Fellini's assistant director, saw, however, beyond the filmmaker's self-effacement. No one, Wertmüller delighted in noting, was more political than Fellini, whose films often touched on matters of human immaturity and emigrations of the soul with minds and hearts rife for totalitarian occupiers and occupations. "There are many of you, but you are all one," exclaims Ivo with a madman's penchant for deeper insight as he comes to realize, in a modernist twist on the Cinderella folk tale, that the shoe of his imagined beloved seems to fit every woman who tries it on.

Kundera, a fervent Fellini aficionado, writes in his novel, *Immortality*:

Without the slightest doubt, there are far fewer gestures in the world than there are individuals. That finding leads us to a shocking conclusion: a gesture is more individual than an individual. We could put it in the form of an aphorism: many people, few gestures.¹⁸

Rollo May and *The Cry for Myth*

It was Fellini's heartfelt belief that the artist's role inheres in counterposing the present's "dehumanizing collective ideologies":

umasking the lie, identifying the unauthentic, and taking apart the indefinite or false absolutes continues to be, for now, the only corrective resource—a mocking inexhaustible safeguard—against our bankrupt history while we are waiting to be prepared to propose and to live under a new hypothesis of the truth.¹⁹

Rollo May's final book, *The Cry for Myth*, was, like Fellini's last film, released in 1991.²⁰ In it, May, also, surveys a barren cultural and experiential landscape while pondering, felicitously, the emergence of new mythologies that, far from mere falsehood, might serve as meaningful beacons and guiding fictions in a forbiddingly brave new world. Like Melville,

¹⁸ Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, transl. Peter Kussi, London, UK: Faber and Faber 1991, pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ Federico Fellini, "Casanova: An Interview with Aldo Tassone," in *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Peter Bondanella, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1978, pp. 27-35, here p. 35.

²⁰ Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth*, New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991.

James, Jaspers, Arendt, and Fellini, May exhorted self-reflection, questions, and the place of paradox. "It's the good people," I recall him opining, ironically, one evening, "we have particularly to fear."²¹

Plague and Vigilance

All in all, I am more existential in my understandings than Professor Desmet. It is, again, the human condition and human nature—unfortunately perhaps, but nonetheless. Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* stands in radical tension with May's *Courage to Create*. Sigmund Freud's inner circle also succumbed to groupthink that could verge on a sort of fascism; this, at least, was Jaspers' observation, one that Matthias Bormuth takes up in *Life Conduct in Modern Times: Karl Jaspers and Psychoanalysis*. May's *The Cry for Myth*, is prescient, I often think, concerning a planet bereft of meaningful guidelines and gods. Consciously or otherwise, human beings mourn the loss of a master narrative. What one is left with, to quote an equally prescient William James, is a "string of raw facts," "provisional and revisable things" (PBC 468).

In the final paragraph of *Psychology: Briefer Course*, James closes with eloquence and grace:

When, then, we talk of "psychology as a natural science," we must not assume that that means a sort of psychology that stands at last on solid ground. It means just the reverse; it means a psychology particularly fragile, and into which the waters of metaphysical criticism leak at every joint, a psychology all of whose elementary assumptions and data must be reconsidered in wider connections and translated into other terms. [PBC 467-8]

I find James' conjoined humility and perspective (Nietzsche had called it a "pathos of distance") wanting in Desmet, whose work might conceivably provoke its own brand of fanaticism.

Professor's Desmet's hope for a potential mitigation of "anxiety, discomfort, frustration, and aggression, without the need for an enemy," indeed, a "new spring of life," is arguably inspired, yet, for me at least, psychologically naive and overly optimistic.²² Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, May's revered mentor, observed that things would quickly become dull if in the end,

²¹ Rollo May, personal communication, 1982.

²² Matthias Desmet, *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*, transl. Els Vanbrabant, White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing 2022, p. 188.

in fact, they cohered. This is how her once psychotic inpatient, Deborah, recalls it in an autobiographical novel on the interrelated matters of madness and insight:

"Look here," Furii said. "I never promised you a rose garden. I never promised you perfect justice..." (She remembered Tilda suddenly, breaking out of the hospital in Nuremburg, disappearing into the swastika-city, and coming back laughing that hard, rasping parody of laughter. "Sholom Aleichem, Doctor, they are crazier than I am!")...and I never promised you peace or happiness. The only reality I offer is challenge, and being well is being free to accept it or not at whatever level you are capable. I never promise lies, and the rose-garden world of perfection is a lie...and a bore, too!"²³

Personally, I am inclined toward a Camusian vigilance, even hypervigilance, in the midst of the latest narratives, narrators, and ideologies we too often mistake for progress. I share common interests and somewhat overlapping reveries with my Belgian colleague. These are approached, however, with different sensibilities, frames of reference, and points of view, and they have, as a consequence, significantly different outcomes.

²³ Hannah Green, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, San Francisco, CA: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1964, p. 128.

The Plague ends, exquisitely, in poetic articulation of brooding awareness:

And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests, that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.²⁴

Upon meeting Camus, Arendt wrote to her husband, Heinrich Blücher:

He is without a doubt the best man they have in France. All the other intellectuals are at most bearable.²⁵

Let me end on this hallowed and cautionary note.

²⁴ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, transl. Stuart Gilbert, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf 1958, p. 278.

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, "Letter May 1, 1952," in *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher 1936-1968*, transl. Peter Constantine, ed. Lotte Kohler, New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc. 2000, p. 164.