Aesthetics, Ascetics, Erotics, Ethics: A Meditation

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ABSTRACT/APOLOGIA
Many times in my academic career I have been confronted with the question, "Why have you used a writer to support your arguments?"—the implication being that by granting equal privilege to such dealers in fiction as Kafka, Bulgakov, Cervantes, Dostoevsky, and Proust to "real" philosophers such as Kant, Bentham, Calvin, Descartes, and Plato, I have done a disservice to the scholarly rigor of academia. It is not interdisciplinary fervor that drives me to sin but rather the realization that art, and literature more particularly, has much to say to social theory and the study of religion, in the most basic sense of opening up the possibility of other worlds, that has led me to such apostasy. I do not contend that literature "humanizes" (the Poetry after Auschwitz? vein of criticism has exploded that humanist myth), but I think Kafka put it best when he said that literature "breaks the frozen seas inside us"—without directing where the shattered ice will flow. In short, just as, as Milan Kundera contends, the "essence" of an individual can only be expressed by means of ("the lightning rod of") metaphor, and since, according to Elaine Scarry, the vocabulary of pain is relentlessly metaphorical, I believe an investigation of an ethics of resistance can gain from analogical and metaphorical disquisition. Such is my task in the following sixteen meditations. I frame the following remarks with a geo-cultural border—using only the work of writers born in Czechoslovakia. For what better metaphor/muse for a discourse on the postmodern situation than a nation created after WWI out of the ruins of the Hapsburg Empire, only to become the first to fall under Hitler; then swallowed up by the Soviet bear; crushed in 1968, freed in the Velvet Revolution of 1989; a nation (or rather, now two nations), one of which, the Czech Republic, was led for a decade by an absurdist playwright who is a devotee of the late great Frank Zappa.

Look! I am living. On what?
Neither childhood nor future grows any smaller…
Superabundant Being wells up in my heart!
– Rainer Maria Rilke

In the dying pages of his phenomenal *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* Max Weber speaks of the "Iron Cage" in which modern man is enmeshed, one in which there can only be "specialists without spirit, and sensualists without heart." I think we can convert Weber's dire apothegm into one more appropriate to our days: there shall be, in this metallic age of "silent poets" (Rilke), only *sensualists without spirit, specialists without heart***.** The modern Western world seems to be populated with hedonists, graspers of the meanest sort, either in their private pursuit of momentary bliss, or their extended pursuit of mammon; and/or those who succumb to the coldness of instrumental reason ("the sclerosis of objectivity," as the Frankfurts say), accepting without complaint the absoluteness of (useful but limited) structures like the bio-medical system and the ("rational") guiding hand of the market. Yet to be a *sensualist with spirit*, or, perhaps, a *spiritualist with sense***,** perhaps *that* is what is needed…a great and rare art indeed. Toward an exuberance of self-limitation!

In his *Immortality*, Milan Kundera, perhaps the greatest living novelist of ideas, develops the useful neologism "imagology" to describe the driving force of the postmodern, post-ideological world. This is, according to the author, a universal transformation: the replacement of systematic, scientific and logical totalities of ideas with clips, sound-bites, images, and change that is limited to perspectival variation. Kundera hearkens back to the Marxists of turn-of-the-century Russia, who "simplified the contents of [their] simple ideology in order to disseminate it." Of course, with further and further simplification, Marxism became its own parody—"and precisely because the remnants of Marx no longer form any *logical* system of *ideas,* but only a series of suggestive images and slogans, we can rightfully talk of a gradual, general, planetary transformation of ideology into imagology" (113-14). The omnipresence of images opens the first question I would like to raise here. What are the prospects of liberation or revolution, even change in a world of images, where *imagogues* are the new *ideologues*? It is relatively easy, after all, to fight an ideology, one need only to oppose it with a counter-ideology (even if, as Foucault contends, this counter-ideology may well be a part of the system it tries to subvert); but how does one counter an image? How to do battle with the omnipresent, unreceptive, and most infuriatingly *mute* images like the Golden Arches which frame the skyline of our (and, increasingly, all) cities? Images thrive on muteness, and the overwhelming abundance of information that can be packed within such silence. Resistance to images defies communication in the regular sense; it invokes *attention* (Weil, Murdoch, McFague)—or, perhaps, attention towards a deeper communication, in the practice and techniques of *asceticism*.

But I would like now to discuss satiation and insatiation, ambiguity and enigma. "Who speaks of victory?" Rilke writes in one of his poems, "To endure is all." Sharon Welch, in her *Feminist Ethic of Risk*, echoes this, putting forth a program of resistance dedicated not to the grand Deed but to the small act—which entails great risk, yet demands no certainty, indeed, forsakes *telos* altogether. The spirit of Don Quixote is revived by Kundera, who in *The Art of the Novel* calls the Hidalgo of La Mancha a harbinger of the plight of "modern man"—while lamenting his "depreciated legacy." "To take, with Cervantes, the world as ambiguity, to be obliged to face not a single truth but a welter of contradicting truths… to have as one's certainty only the *wisdom of ambiguity,* requires [great] courage" (6-7). To strive without a goal: Robert Musil (favorite of Kundera, born in Vienna, but of Czech descent) says "Men are always inexpressibly happy when circumstances are such that they are incapable of fulfilling their desires" (Musil's epic *Man Without Qualities* was never finished…). Georges Bataille goes so far as to call this an inherent obligation in poetry—an obligation to turn dissatisfaction into a permanent object (*Literature and Evil* 45). This is a curious turn: away from certainty of victory, yet without lapsing into disinterested apathy; fueled by the very lack of hope to *hope all the more*, without depreciating the present in favor of the future. If, as Foucault has argued,

revolution is no longer possible, then these writers are attempting to formulate paths of 'resistance' outside of the traditional ones. Rilke: "We must embrace struggle… Everything in nature grows and struggles in its own way, establishing its own identity, insisting on it at all costs" (*Letters* 63).

Along with this paradoxical goalless ethics of risk comes the notion of ambiguity. Here, let me invoke two Czech authors once again: Kafka, of whom Erich Heller proclaimed "Ambiguity has never been considered as an elemental force; it is precisely this in [his] stories" (Bloom *Ruin* 221); and Kundera, who claims "without the art of ambiguity there is no real eroticism, and the stronger the ambiguity, the more powerful the excitement" (*Immortality* 130). Similarly, Roland Barthes: The erotic is "*where the garment gapes*" (*Pleasure* 9). But how have we come to eroticism from resistance? This is a crucial point: the centrality of ambiguity, evasiveness, insatiation in not only the erotic, but in love of all forms, including the love of God. *Et quid, amabo nisi quod aenigma est*—"And what am I to love if not the enigma," the motto of Italian painter Georgio de Chirico. *L'amour c'est l'homme inachevé,* says Paul Elluard, and he is preceded by the Flemish Beguine Hadewijch of Antwerp, who sings of love's diaphorescence: "They who live thus in hunger for Love / And yet lack fruition, / O who can praise them enough?" (*Works* 166). To love without hope for fruition, to resist without certainty of victory. Hadewijch connects the highest love with suffering: "He who lives on love with no success / Endures, in the madness of love, / Suffering that can only be known / By him who sincerely forsakes all for Love, / And then remains unnourished by her (165). Just as there is an "erotics of domination," in which, according to Sharon Welch, oppressive power gains much of its force through the claim of submission to a greater (moral/religious/ rational) purpose, so too there may be an "erotics of resistance," one which celebrates uncertainty and ambiguity, yet struggles against domination in all forms.

Hadewijch's suffering love leads into a discussion of *askesis* and the relevance of pain to personal identity. Dostoevsky questions how we are supposed to love, in Tolstoyan fashion, such a thing as abstract as "humankind," even if we know that humanity suffers in some distant part of the world. He goes so far as to say that it is in fact impossible to have such a love, which is a mere pretense; one can only love, and empathize with, a *concrete being*. As usual, Dostoevsky gives us pause to examine our assumptions. Certainly, the maxim of Descartes, "I think, therefore I am," is, as a certain author puts it, "the statement of an intellectual who underrates toothaches." *I feel therefore I am,* is perhaps a more universally valid trope, and one that applies to all sentient beings. Ideas are fewer than people, but my pain is mine: "Suffering is the university of egocentrism" (Kundera *Immortality* 200). How then, does one empathize with suffering and pain? Even proximity, even love cannot allow one to actually *feel* the pain of the Other. Pain does not create solidarity or community; if anything, pain and suffering *alienate.* The Marquis de Sade helps us to see this. As David Morris says, pain, in Sade, "tends to open an almost impassable gulf between individuals, implicitly discrediting or questioning our usual pieties about brotherhood and the human community" (*Culture* 238). Sade's libertines can be apathetic to the suffering of their victims because these are remote to their world. Related to this is Welch's condemnation of the "cultured despair" of the Western middle class, whose privilege is in large part built upon the suffering of others—others usually distant in space as well as in context. Thus the priority of "enworlding" pain arises, for it is only enworlded pain that can have meaning—in the sense of redemptive, resistant possibilities.

Perhaps imagination is the answer, as "the only good thing which heaven vouchsafes to the skeptic and pessimist alarmed by the eternal abjectness of life" (Huysmans *Là Bas* 181). Imagination can help combat the "cultured despair" derided by Welch and others as the particular malaise of the Western middle class. "Look, I am living!" shouts Rilke—but "On what?" Denial of suffering is undoubtedly worse than acceptance and apathy. But these may not the only two options. In the ethics of creativeness, as put forth by writers like Welch and Nikolas Berdyaev, humanity is redeemed from the Law in order to create. Law, says Berdyaev, while necessary for our sinful world, is not the source of ethics but rather a byproduct, and must be ceaselessly transcended. Moreover, this new conception of ethics changes the way we view the battle against evil: evil is now to be transfigured creatively, not simply crushed out. This ethics of exuberance—of more life—is directed always towards others as well as the self, and even to the cosmos that it seeks to transfigure. Fired by imagination, the envisioning of different and better lives, the imagination of the perfect kingdom must not tempt us, says Berdyaev, to enforce it at all costs. Enforced perfection is the dystopian kingdom of the Grand Inquisitor (*Destiny* 6). The ethics of creativeness is not without incumbent risks; indeed, it is in some sense defined by risk. With Berdyaev, Welch puts forth a theology of divine immanence; an understanding of human empowerment through the transformative-creative love of self, others, and life itself. Welch proclaims the joy that arises out of a love of life even in—or especially in—the most compromising and difficult circumstances. Love is not passive acceptance, however: not to resist is "the death of the imagination… [without which] we lose the ability to imagine strategies of resistance and ways of sustaining each other in the long struggle for justice" (*Ethics* 20).

Certainly, we must always "choose life"—if only because, in the felicitous words of Alice Walker, it is less boring than death and there are fresh peaches there. Ah, but are there not also fresh apples (Eve) and pears (Augustine)? These are the risks, that our fruit may be rotten, or worse. Absolute freedom is frightening, yet Yahweh as the God of Freedom is more amenable than the traditional God of Necessity, particularly when he allows Abraham to barter with him for the fate of the Cities of the Plain ("Can it be—heaven forbid—you, judge of all the earth, will not bring justice?' says the daring Abram, in a scene which to this reader is unmatched for drama in the Bible). This is the spirit of God that I would like to see invoked more often, a God who lives and, most importantly, is capable and willing to respond, for *only* with the possibility of response can love exist. One cannot love the God of Aristotle—the "unmoved mover." "More life" is the battle cry of Jacob, the wrestler at Jabbok, the heel-clutcher become angel-clutcher (or God-clutcher!) risking his life and limb for the Blessing. Goethe's Mephistopheles tells Faust: "All theory, my friend, is grey, but green is life's glad golden tree" (*Faust I,* 98). The Tree of Life (Gen 3:22)—what is it? What can it mean? Obviously it is in some sense the real danger of Eden, but if God is the ultimate bestower of life, then why does he need "winged sphinxes and the waving sword, both sides flashing" to guard this tree while the banished humans make their way East of Eden? And why did not Satan tempt them with the fruits of *this* more tempting

tree rather than the Tree of Knowledge? Perhaps the struggling Jacob, in his agon/agony at Jabbok, won back from God the Tree of Life, in the sense of immortality not for a man, but for Israel, a *people*. Kafka: "We are sinful, not only because we have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, but also because we have not yet eaten of the Tree of Life…" (*Octavo* 37). Jacob's struggle, it seems, was not enough.

Love God, and do what you will. For the Beguine mystics, the freed soul can take leave of ecclesiastical hierarchy and the moral virtues, even to the point of transcending the need for God Himself—insofar as this need still implies exteriority and duality, since, having become *identified* with Him, she has become "what He is," in a fashion similar to the Orthodox trope of "Godmanhood." Yet the Beguines did not, for all this, reject the human aspect of the Incarnation, or suffering more generally: for both Hadewijch and Mechthild the most precious treasure is the suffering of being deprived of fruition—the "forsakenness" of the figure on the cross? It is a curious thing that, for all the tendencies in theological ethics towards Arianism (admitted without apology by Tolstoy, for whom Jesus was a great ethical teacher, and nothing more), many still seem to be docetics at heart. The image on the cross is that of Raphael: serene, strong, valorous, god-like, virile even in His suffering. Believers have been resistant to accepting the limitations of Jesus-the-man, Jesus-the-doubter, Jesus-the-crucified body. Yet it is only by overcoming this stoical and serene triumphal figure that one is able to envisage the "alternative" Christ of Dostoevsky, Holbeim, and Grünewald, he who suffers horribly yet who is, in his pain and humility, one who can receive and give love without the disinterestedness of reason, or the distance of omnipotence, qualities that characterize what Dorothee Soelle calls the "apathetic God" of the normative traditions (*Suffering*). According to Soelle, the story of Jesus' passion can be seen as a narrative about suffering. It is falsified, she says, whenever it is robbed of the dimensions of pain, terror, and anguish: "It is the story of a man whose goal is shattered… But this despair over his own cause would be incomplete – and below the level of human suffering – without the physical and social experience the story describes" (*Suffering* 16).

It is fair to say, I think, that Franz Kafka's *oeuvre* is the scripture of the twentieth century: beautiful, ironic, prophetic, obtuse, tragic, Kafka is perhaps the writer most like the great biblical scribe known to scholars as "J" (whom according to Harold Bloom, was a woman). Though often associated (as in the very term "Kafkaesque") with angst, terror, fear, alienation, Kafka's stories and (especially) his parables abound with satire, irony, and a humor which, though often biting, is at times playful and whimsical, and is in some sense a resistance to the omnivorous exophagy of the industrial-bureaucratic universe which he depicts (maybe sex is assimilated and commodified, but laughter?). John Updike: "In Kafka's peculiar and highly original case this dreadful quality [of acute, anxious self-consciousness] is mixed with immense tenderness, oddly good humour, and a certain severe and reassuring formality" (*Stories* ix). Kafka, unlike, say, Schopenhauer and his disciple Tolstoy (whom, despite his contact with Thoreau, remained much more devoted to the spirit of the German arch-pessimist), but similar to his predecessor and ally Dostoevsky, comes off as strangely upbeat, as if by delving into the abyss, the writer comes into a glimmering light. Both the Russian and the Czech are hypersensitive (*erethitic*) personalities, and their art is a reflection of this openness to everything, even at the expense of intense pain and suffering—"a sensitivity acute beyond usefulness, as if the nervous system, flayed of its old hide of social usage and religious belief, must record every touch as pain" (*Stories* ix). Yet it is this fearful "openness" that allows for the glimmer of resistance, a quality Kundera calls the "hypertrophy of the soul."

Kafka (like Heidegger, to an extent) was obsessed with "building," with work that is never done, that can never be done, that must always fall short of perfection. An addict of ambiguity, he was content to leave his works in an open state like that of his Great Wall—"their segments uncertainly linked, strange gaps left, the ultimate objective shied away from as if too blindingly grand" (*Stories* xii). Updike: "Not to write for money or the coarser forms of glory is common enough among modern avant-gardists; but to abjure aesthetic 'finish' itself carries asceticism a step further into a realm of protests where such disparate modernists as Eliot and Pound (in the intrinsically fragmentary nature of their poetry) and Rilke and Salinger (in their capacities for silence) keep Kafka company" (*Stories* xii). This priority of incompletion reflects, not, as some might say, masochism, but a realization perhaps of the unsatisfactory character of satiation. The imagogues who run our society peddle satiation, while simultaneously holding it out of our reach. Does Kafka bespeak a resistant non-satiation—an aesthetic of asceticism upon which to ground liberatory ethics? "Writing is a form of prayer', Kafka wrote in his diary, and though his work is by no means theological (in the strict sense, of being *only* theological, or having theological issues/themes as its intent), nothing stops us from drawing from his writings to help us re-image the deity and an ethics of acetic openness. Camus: "the whole of Kafka's art consists in compelling the reader to re-read him." Given some license, in the remaining pages I will attempt to unveil the surplus meaning of two Kafkan parables in particular, in order to draw out some issues that impinge upon suffering and the possibility of asceticism in a consumer-driven society.

According to David Morris, "The modern world employs pain with a detachment that reflects our need to distance ourselves from affliction at the same time we are fascinated by it and put it to multiple uses" (*Culture* 183). A veritable revolution has taken place over the past several centuries: from the Guillotine to "smart-bombs," attempts have been made to cleanse pain of its messiness—to rationalize pain, in the name (at least in the case of the former, and I think also, less explicitly, with the latter) of "humanitarianism," while hiding the element of spectacle which is still there to tease us. Most striking about Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* is not the horrible machine itself, or the coldness of its defender, but rather the pity, the pathos invoked in the name of the soon-to-be-obsolete Harrow and its last, lone advocate. The machine, designed to literally inscribe upon the prisoner's body his crime, is supposed to give redemption in this process—a moment of "enlightenment" before death takes hold. In the end, the Officer submits to his own device in the name of justice, yet he fails to be redeemed. The Harrow, in its last gasp, comes apart and jabs its needles into his body, eventually spitting him upon itself as a gruesome human skewer; "no sign was visible of the promised redemption… the look was calm and convinced, through the forehead went the point of the great iron spike" (*Stories* 157). Most striking about the tale is not so much the horror of the Harrow as the suspicion of the Officer (and author?) of the hypocrisy of the post-Harrow disciplinary system, which will no doubt hide (cf. Foucault) the application of pain and punishment, not rejecting

its use but only its obviousness, the spectacle of its forms. Thus the Harrow reads as a 'parodic exposure of our more "civilized" means of control, unmasking "the relation between pain and force" (184), but also directs our gaze to what is hidden behind the image of "justice" and of "humanitarian" punishment.

Another parable of Kafka's, "The Hunger Artist," gives us a glimpse of the ambiguity of asceticism and the commodification of such. Professional fasting, once acclaimed, has now lost its prestige (like the Harrow), and the Hunger Artist is forced to take his place in a circus, relegated to a narrow spot on the way to the menagerie, a particularly favored attraction. Wasting away without recognition, the Hunger Artist becomes embittered, "the world was cheating him of his reward" (*Stories* 275). Yet at the end of his days, his withered body in danger of being lost in the straw of his cage, the Hunger Artist confesses: "Forgive me, everybody," he implores, though "I always wanted you to admire my fasting…y ou shouldn't admire it." Why? "[B]ecause I *have* to fast… because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you and anyone else" (277). These were, of course, his last words. Once we have stopped laughing, smiling at the humor of this twist, we can see that it raises the important issue of intentionality. Why does one be an ascetic? Why go through self-imposed pain and suffering? Because, like the Hunger Artist, one cannot find the "food" that one likes? But the parable does not end with the death and confession of the Hunger Artist. Kafka adds an epilogue: into the cage of the late Hunger Artist comes a young panther, who leaps about the cage that had for so long been dreary. "The panther was all light… he seemed not even to miss his freedom; his noble body, furnished almost to the bursting-point with all that it needed, seemed to carry freedom around with it." The panther, unlike the ascetic, *exudes freedom*, even in captivity, and though onlookers are shocked and slightly repelled by his ferocity, they "braced themselves, crowded around the cage, and did not ever want to move away." The mock freedom of the great beast is a fascination to the "free" humans.

Life is astoundingly short," is another of Kafka's apothegms. But it is no so much the shortness of an individual life as the shortness of *human* life that is troublesome—while being, in another sense, emancipatory. Speaking of Moses, Kafka writes the following in his diary: "The fact that he was not to see the Promised Land until just before his death is incredible… Moses did not fail to reach Canaan because *his* life was too short, but because his was a *human* life" (Bataille *Literature and Evil* 152). Bataille comments: "This is no longer a mere denunciation of the vanity of one 'aspect of life', but of the vanity of all endeavors, which are equally senseless…" (153). Traditional forms of revolution, in their prioritization of the future over the present, raise no problem of principle, of ethics: "the whole of humanity is prepared to subordinate the present moment to the imperative power of a goal."

> I do not hope for victory, I do not enjoy the struggle for its own sake, I could only enjoy it because it is all I can do. As such the struggle does indeed fill me with a joy which is more than I can really enjoy, more than I can give, and I shall probably end by succumbing not to the struggle but to the joy.
> – Kafka (in Bataille *Literature and Evil* 161)

Kafka undercuts *every* type of bureaucracy and pseudo-justice, whether left, right, or center. Michel Carrouges criticizes the skepticism with which Kafka regards every revolutionary undertaking, "for he sets problems which are not political problems, but which are human and eternally post-revolutionary problems" (166). Indeed! And what is politics in a world of imagogues and Foucauldian power but a series of attempts to grapple with "human and post-revolutionary problems."

A politics of communication in the sense raised by Bataille, "which abandons the consciousnesses that reflect each other, to the impenetrability which they 'ultimately' are" (200), involves a resolution to act against pain and suffering that stems not from an attempt to gain access to such, but from a recognition of the pain of the Other with the help of the imagination—i.e., aesthetics. One strength of Bataille's work is his recognition of the principle of modernity not in rootless self-autonomy or in the sterility of cognitive rationalism so much as in the success-oriented utilitarian actions that govern the ethics of subjectivity—i.e., the glorification of the *homo economicus* of Marx and Smith. Moreover, this is a false success-orientation, for it is not free, but is fettered to a system of dependencies, masked by the ever-present images, as revealed by the likes of Kafka. Resistance to such must stem from the very human and everyday practices of living. The idea that aestheticism and asceticism are incompatible is simply untrue—despite the this-worldly hedonism of many *fin-de-siècle* followers of Pater and the Symbolists. Were not Thoreau and Nietzsche, for all their differences, both disciples of Emerson? There can be beauty in asceticism (and an "ethic," though we need not go so far as Wittgenstein and say that "aesthetics and ethics are one"), and it is a beauty that is not necessarily of the macabre (or the sado-sublime). Perhaps the following lines of Whitman, another disciple of Emerson, best embodies the Thoreau-Nietzsche dialectic: an *ascetics of the senses*—of the "open body."

> The bodies of men and women engirth me,
> and I engirth them,
> They will not let me off nor I them till I go with them
> And respond to them and love them.
> Was it dreamed whether those who corrupted
> their own live bodies could conceal themselves?

Renunciation, as Heidegger says, always conceals itself by turning out to be an affirmation. "This self-cancellation is the essence of asceticism: a dynamic, mobile ideology whose mark is ceaseless struggle towards a goal that is always unreachable, a goal whose realization is blocked by the very methods of achieving it" (Harpham *Ascetic* 18). We have seen this in both Hadewijch and Kafka, and in the "risk ethics" of Sharon Welch. One last point, however, that I would like to raise before summing up these meditations, has to do with the place of the Other in asceticism. According to Barthes, the impulse to *askesis* is always directed toward the other: "turn back, look at me, see what you have made of me" (*A Lover's Discourse*). Yet it has been a curious trope of existentialism, and phenomenology, to *fear* the presence and gaze of the other. Rilke speaks of the glory of loving, and the horror of being loved (his character/double Malte Laurids Brigge cries: "To be loved means to be consumed in flames. To love is to give light with inexhaustible oil. To be loved is to pass away; to love is to endure" (*Malte* 221). Hadewijch would accept this, but with relish, conflating the dialectic and living on the tension. Sartre also grappled with his evident distaste for the

Other while trying to formulate his engaged existentialism. An asceticism that fears the Other is prone to sterility; mute attention has its limits, if it does not allow the return of the gaze. This is where receptivity—Kafkan "openness"—is fertile, despite the encumbent risks. Re-imaging the deity as one who responds, and one whom we can respond to, helps to translate the language of love and attention from the mute gaze to the approachable and open receptivity of *communication*, with beings whom with we can never identify completely, but towards whom our quixotic quest must point, in enworlding them. As someone once said, we need to risk the "sin" of imagining the unimaginable.

It is not that we are all hedonists, despite what Foucault calls the Great Sexual Sermon. If only it were so. Instead, we *pretend* to be hedonists, lauding the freedom of Eros and the glories of the liberated libido while what we are really concerned with is merely the *appearance of such.* "Nowadays hedonists do not exist… no matter what they say… all of them are eager for admiration and not for pleasure… reality no longer means anything to anyone" (Kundera *Immortality* 343). It is no longer ideas that stir the minds of humans, but images, or, perhaps, the ideology of images—*imagology*. The only way to combat the pervasiveness of images is to re-imagine the world and ourselves via metaphor and analogy. To construct, by way of an "honest asceticism," the matrix through which resistance can become an *entelechy*—a force which makes the potential actual. Only thus can we give meaning to Kafka's extraordinary maxim: "What is laid upon us is to accomplish the negative; the positive is already given." The negative: *askesis*. The positive: *aesthesis*. Asceticism creates identity through non-satiation, yet suffering cannot be idealized, it must rather be *enworlded*. The building of ascetic openness to the real presence of others is the essential tension of an aesthetics of ascetics. "Those who regard desire as essentially unrestricted in its mobility would feel that temptation is special and anomalous. But from the ascetic point of view… desire is inconceivable without resistance" (Harpham *Ascetic* 61). Asceticism is not the resistance *to* temptation, but the resistance *of* temptation; it does impose on desire an alien and external series of motivations, but rather describes a rigorous realization of elements intrinsic to the economy of desire itself, The goal is not the deadening of desire, but the *channeling* of desire without allowing for satiation—for the satisfaction of desire, as Hadewijch and Proust well knew, is its very death. The caveat of an open asceticism: "Seek but do not find!" Quixote redux.

Epilogue

Why do we hang onto Christianity? asks Nietzsche. Perhaps because it would be too bothersome to attempt to create a new religio-cultural embodiment of the lived lives of so many Western people—one that, for all its faults, remains an immensely fertile ground upon which to build a future. Besides, without God there would be no devil, and what would the world be without Satan to tempt Job, Mephistopheles to tutor Goethe, Sade to punish Justine, and Nietzsche to tempt us? Temptation is an integral part of *askesis*, resistance, and art. Nietzsche says in *The Will to Power* that he wants to make asceticism "natural" again; and proclaims, at the end of the Genealogy of Morals: "All honor to the ascetic ideal insofar as it is honest!" (§3.26). This is, indeed, a great and rare art—to give a good name to asceticism, i.e, to reject the asceticism of Kafka's Hunger Artist. Here Bataille's trope of "communication" gets us past the Other-angst of existentialism, and the knowledge of pain and suffering—of evil—through literature and art may form the basis of such communication. Perhaps we can look forwards, with the late Foucault, towards a reconstruction of an *askesis* based on self-knowledge (*epimelesthai sautou*) and grounded in a re-conceptualization of selfhood as a creative process of overcoming. Combating oppression in our time, when "power" is diffuse and often disembodied, that is to say, located within systems of discourse as well as in social, political and economic structures, must involve not only an ethic to combat the obvious abuses of power but also the more deeply embedded oppression that has its root in a way of thinking, speaking, and conceptualizing the world. In simple terms, following the Bard from Manhattan: Dismiss what insults your soul!—taking the final term to mean not a disembodied spirit but rather the essentiality of human(e)ness which is rooted in self-awareness but quickly goes beyond such to analogize with others. Kafka, as usual, provides the last word: "Believing means liberating the indestructible element in oneself; or, more accurately, liberating oneself, or, more accurately, being indestructible, or, more accurately, being."

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