Shirkin' the Ghosts of the Meantime

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JUST up the steps outside the underground, ready to endure the shrill blast of wind on Hungerford Bridge, I am passing by some homeless people when above them, painted in white, is graffiti that reads *Revolution is the Opium of the Intellectuals*. I continue my way to the Hayward Gallery in evening twilight, indignant to say the least.

That was 1989. I smirk at the recollection. I recently stumbled upon what I had presumed to be the origins of this graffiti, hence the return. It was taken from Lindsay Anderson's *O Lucky Man!* (1973). It appears towards the end of the film when the happy-go-lucky Mike is released from prison with his new found humanitarian zeal. This was after having been haplessly done over by various forms of state and corporate greed. Against the backdrop of the graffiti, Mike's attempts to help some down-and-outs are thwarted when he is attacked by them. Only when he makes a choice informed by his experiences – not to smile when demanded by the film director – is he freed from narrative servitude. He can now join and be embraced by the partying crowd of actors, musicians and film crew involved in constructing the preceding fiction. Alan Price's title tune reinforces the key theme: the lucky man is he who reasons to live in friendship, uncovers the joy of knowledge and revels in the chance pleasures of life.

There is a familiar narrative device at play here. It is one where the central character has an endearing comic blindness that reveals to his audience a reality just out of his grasp. The veil slowly recedes and so the main character is finally aligned with the viewer. Its literary form can be found in Voltaire's *Candide*, to take one example from many. Here, the naïve Candide slowly recognizes the fallacy of Panglossian optimism when challenged by numerous disasters, reaching a more informed understanding of his existence. Thus we are allied with Candide and his circle as they retreat to cultivate their garden – just as Voltaire advocated his colleagues to leave society in order to write. Once again, a reasoned resolution is found in seeking shelter from the unforgiving realities of worldly circumstance in pursuit of the good life and an acceptance of an individual's limitations. It appears that this enduring narrative format can encompass, among others, the pastoral retreat and the pleasures of 1960s counterculture.

So what am I to make of that indignant student, and he of me, for that matter? Surely my present self, having the clear upper hand in this regard, is not going to reduce ourselves to a familiar narrative format of estrangement and resolve? I would like to see myself as a less conventional fiction than that. The smirk goes some way to registering the irony of an idealistic youth instinctively rebutting a challenge in the hope that an aesthetic pursuit can go unquestioned. What lingers now, even when weariness marks my attitude towards the emancipatory rhetoric driving much critical theory, is that the smirk is not wholly explaining itself. There is something shifting in the attitude towards a quote which will not go away.

The graffiti itself takes inspiration from Raymond Aron's *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955). Aron draws on Karl Marx's 'religion is the opium of the people' and Simon Weil's claim that Marxism is an 'inferior' form of religion where its convictions become the 'opium of the people'. I am going to leave Aron's book for another day since the aim here is to get to grips with the initial encounter with the graffiti. The graffiti nonetheless can be seen as a riff upon this base. It has the sense that an adherence to the Judaeo-Christian creeds and the emancipatory drive of the intellectual are both delusions evading an enduring human or material predicament. It is not quite hopelessness that the riff offers but a grim realism confronting leftist rhetoric. I am reminded of Richard Wollheim's defence of Sigmund Freud against those revolutionaries and virtuous believers who sought to recruit his ideas for their cause (I have always presumed Wollheim aimed this at Marcuse among others).[1] Freud, Wollheim argued, despised such pious optimism. Freud recognized the untameable character of the human condition and so disagreed with the socialist notion that the fundamental problems of human society are due to society rather than human nature. While we may be swayed by reasoned arguments, our relative comforts are all too capable of muffling those demands. Freud might have found value in the pursuit of knowledge and subsequent grounds for action, but this was not a recipe for fresh hope. The human subject is to be forever fractured, forever in tension and conflict. We are to be forever making deals and concessions in our desire for civility. And in the process, we are to be forever seeking to repress instinctual pleasures in the hope of avoiding real pain and suffering. The sense of permanence is striking here.

To be fair to Marx, the 'religion …' quote has all too often been misconstrued. Here it is in its immediate context:

> *Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.*[2]

One senses a rich sympathy for this form of solace but ultimately, for Marx, it is illusory. Interestingly, Marx drew upon the narrative of estrangement and resolve to make this clear: 'religion is … the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again'.[3]

The debate hovers around the notion of ideology. The classic Marxist view takes ideology as a form of false consciousness. It contributes to the production of alienated or estranged individuals by masking their own oppression within the 'real' conditions of class struggle. True social conditions can be uncovered by inquiry governed by the rigours of historical and dialectical materialism. Through collective action, an individual can thus be liberated from these imposed illusions upheld by powerful social forces.

IMAGE: © John Duncan
from *Boom Town* (2002)
[http://www.johnduncan.info]

Contemporary critical theory retains the libertarian impulse at the heart of this dynamic. Slavoj Žižek, for example, argues that despite a prevalent cynicism, our actions and convictions still bind us to practices of domination. Ideology, through social structures, generates deep convictions in the rectitude of the system before we are aware of it. The truth claims of the classic Marxist view are reworked by recourse to Lacan's notion of the Real – as that void we can only sense via its mediation through the Symbolic. While no privileged objective perspective is secured, attention to the fundamental antagonism between the realms of the Real and the Symbolic can at least counter prevailing ideologies in circulation. In this way, an ongoing ideological critique can be maintained.

Žižek's *In Defense of Lost Causes* goes further than this. He calls for a new emancipatory terror to counter first a politics of fear governing the domain of ecology, and second a fatalism underlying the liberal-democratic belief that capitalism is the only show in town. Žižek summons the monstrous to dramatize his point. Biogenetic developments are collapsing the nature/man couplet by which we have come to know ourselves ('it is *nature itself* which melts into air').[4] Žižek pictures the catastrophe of unforeseen results as a central feature of the 'ecology of fear':

> *This ecology of fear has every chance of developing into the predominant form of ideology of global capitalism, a new opium of the masses replacing declining religion: it takes over the old religion's fundamental function, that of having an unquestionable authority which can impose limits.*[5]

Žižek finds scientific assessments of dangers and risks on this new terrain unverifiable. He draws on the groundlessness of our own existence, and given the spectre of looming catastrophe, calls for a 'Leap of Faith' in advocating a new terror. It is one propped by a vision of divine violence able to overwhelm the violence necessary to maintain and expand the scope of global capitalism.

One senses a fiendish grin in Žižek's delivery since his target is ultimately the complacency of liberal critical thought towards the question of political violence and the sense that there is now no 'realistic' revolutionary perspective available. 'But does this not give us a strange freedom, a freedom to experiment?', he asks, noting that a radical alternative will not arrive on its own accord.[6] Hence, Žižek recognizes a history of failed attempts as a resource for possible future action, citing, more than once, the value of Beckett's endurance through failure ('Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'). The idea of revolution is, at least, kept alive as a sounding board from which Žižek expects the range of new 'radical' alternatives to be heard.

Gilles Deleuze, by contrast, had difficulty with the oppressive character accorded to ideology, as if a liberated self is simply to crawl out from beneath its suffocating fictive strictures. Instead, the individual is seen to be created from chaotic flows of desire, where intensities are assembled, coded and drawn into various interests. Desire is seen as a power in itself, one capable of producing enslaving images but also a power to become and create images beyond. Power, it is argued, is desire, not law.[7] Hence it can be asked why we should limit ourselves even to the image of social citizens, why not *become other*? And further still, why not pitch becoming against our own recognition of becoming? Deleuzian politics targets the perceived shortfalls of a Marxist tradition that seeks the self-constitution of a collective subject through institutionalized collective action. Terms such as deterritorialization and the molecularization of politics focus on how a 'pure potentiality' can be sought.[8]

Deleuze's fascination with a revolutionary becoming lies in the virtual complexities of the event of a becoming-people. He makes clear that this is quite a different thing from the often fraught and terrifying circumstances of revolutionary upheaval.[9] Indeed, critics of Deleuze point to how he leaves untouched the question of how a momentum can be mustered to effect political change. Peter Hallward, for example, finds Deleuzian politics lacking a grounded strategy.[10] Žižek, by contrast, flirts provocatively with a radical upheaval in present circumstance.

It would appear we have two strands of thought differentiated in terms of impendence: the zeal of Žižek to seize the moment and Deleuze's revolutionary becoming on the virtual long finger. Žižek's line appears more threatening in evoking a necessary terror in present circumstance. It is also threatening in its polemical handling of the tragic violent chaos that marks revolutionary upheaval in recent history. And yet the more comforting deferral in Deleuzian politics would appear to contain its own downfall. I think here of Eyal Weizman's account of how the Israeli Defence Force in 2002 had drawn on the spatial and non-hierarchical models of Deleuze and Guattari (amongst others) as a means to redefine military interpretations of urban space. This was so as to outwit the logic of existing guerrilla tactics in the Palestinian territories. Weizman outlines the tactic of 'walking through walls'. This is where troops swarm the territory and move in tight units through urban terrain with relative autonomy and initiative. They literally blast through walls/homes and thereby avoid their vulnerability to street conflict. The implications are chilling:

> *Activities whose operational means is the 'un-walling of the wall' thus destabilize not only the legal and social order, but the democratic order itself. With the wall no longer physically and conceptually solid and legally impenetrable, the functional spatial syntax that is created – the separation between inside and outside, private and public, as well as between retreat and exclusion – collapses.*[11]

The point here is not to set blame at the feet of Deleuze et al. Nor is it a tactic to invigorate Žižek's polemic with a sense of what the stakes really are now. Rather, it is to state outright what I hope has been coming clear at this stage – that a sense of the tragic pervades the whole discourse. For at Žižek's feet, we can place the following quote from Thomas Carlyle, writing in 1840:

> *Men who discern in the misery of the toiling complaining millions not misery, but only a raw material which can be wrought upon and traded in, for one's own poor hide-bound theories and egoisms; to whom millions of living fellow-creatures, with beating hearts in their bosoms, beating, suffering, hoping, are 'masses', mere 'explosive masses for blowing down Bastilles with', for voting at hustings for us: such men are of the questionable species.*[12]

Carlyle finds a dangerous vanity at the heart of the revolutionary call (including his own) that contributes to the tragic dimension of social change.

Raymond Williams cites Carlyle in his work *Modern Tragedy* (1966). For Williams, tragedy and revolution are often characterized as opposites. Revolution embodies an optimistic and naïve will to change radically social conditions and end the suffering which tragedy is seen to ratify. The tragic perspective, by contrast, recognizes the delusion and folly of it all and is resigned to its inevitability. Withdrawal and passivity is the common option.

Williams proposes that tragedy should instead be seen as a valuable element in an active response to social disorder. Williams is an advocate of radical social change through rational argument, consensus and non-violence. All too often, he finds the suffering at the heart of revolutionary upheaval to be suppressed as the event or period in question is transformed into historical narrative. The successful revolution, Williams writes, is 'not tragedy but epic'.[13] Williams insists on the primacy of suffering in the midst of the confusion and violent disorder of revolutionary upheaval. Violence and disorder, however, are seen in the grander social and historical context in which revolution is but only the crisis of that present. In other words, as with Žižek (or Walter Benjamin for that matter), violence is not peculiar to the revolutionary moment but an ever-present feature of the existing order. Revolution will thus remain necessary so long as 'the full humanity of any class of men is in practice denied'.[14] And further still, Williams recognizes that the long struggle against human alienation will produce its own new forms of alienation to which one should be continuously alert. It is in this sense that revolution – as the 'actual suffering of real men' – is viewed in a tragic perspective. Williams concludes:

> *We have to see the evil and the suffering, in the factual disorder that makes revolution necessary, and in the disordered struggle against the disorder. We have to recognize this suffering in a close and immediate experience, and not cover it with names.*[15]

Williams' tragic perspective makes clear that 'what we learn in suffering is again revolution'.[16]

Williams' take is impressive, not least for its challenge to the 'Revolution is the Opium …' quote. There is a weight that exposes the delusions of emancipatory zeal. What remains is an impulse to counter an expanse of tragic dimensions. This can only be achieved by working through its complexities. The tragic, for Williams, is not quite fatalism, not quite helplessness, but the presence of both is looming. From this perspective, the 'Revolution …' quote appears, at best, too jaded. Williams' momentum seems closer to that grim realism initially ascribed to the quote, while the quote itself now seems trapped in its insistence of revolution as a frozen delusion. At worst, the quote is flat wrong in that its opposite is true. The idea of revolution is far from the intellectual's palliative or escape. Instead, it embodies a stark realization that it is an inevitable commitment where one will be pitted against its other. The spectre of violence haunts the chaos and disorder of revolution whether principles of non-violence are adhered to or not. From this perspective, it may well be revolution (the tragic) we seek to avoid and the lure of escape and retreat is the true opiate.

Still, when the quote is placed before the academic gamesmanship of Žižek and the prolonged deferral of Deleuze, its mood lifts significantly and regains authority. Moreover, if one considers the kind of fervour accompanying claims for the impact of the internet on the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring, to take some recent examples, one senses how misguided optimism for a globalized

emancipation further strengthens the 'Revolution …' quote. It would also appear that more despondent reactions that see no clear line of resistance to the current impasse fare better in the court of the quote. In this absence of hope, an apolitical inertia or indifference threatens to fill the void. A fear of permanent entrapment haunts withdrawal. For Williams to hold the line is a difficult challenge in dour circumstance. To destabilize the quote is an achievement in itself.

It is the brute quality of the quote that is discomforting. The smirk has registered a youth avoiding its negative implications so as to visit an art gallery unchallenged. The initial indignation can now be worked through. For what is becoming clear is that an illusion was being preserved then, albeit rather awkwardly, and indeed is being preserved now. My position now is no different to as it was then. It is to hold to an ideal. It is a belief in a fraternity between aesthetics and politics: that dreams, hopes, fantasies and fictions in all their (delusory?) forms, not to mention the efforts to sense possible routes out of our current impasse, are all the imaginative pleasures of the meantime. *O Lucky Man!* and *Candide* are fine examples in this regard. They point to the good life in the pastoral retreat and in the revelry of friendship. And a bookish endeavour such as this is no less born of the dynamics of retreat and repose, estrangement and resolve. The cynical judgement of the quote would seek to deny all of this in the name of a grim sobriety. As if we are to be unaware of the daily grind and the politics of the workplace: the negotiations, confrontations and compromises, the balancing between commitment and withdrawal, the shifting alliances, the victories and the defeats. And moreover, these uncertain encounters are intensified by the mindless efficiency and instrumentalism of dominant neoliberal policies in the education and arts sectors (and beyond). Freud's vision of tension, conflict, concession and repression as enduring and irresolvable features of the desire for civility no doubt emerged from comparable troubled times. Importantly though, a desire for a just settlement lies at the heart of these conflicts. Terry Eagleton captures the point well:

> *It is because the impulse to freedom from oppression, however that goal is culturally framed, seems as obdurate and implacable as the desire to material survival.*[17]

The encounter with the quote was ultimately a threatening one. The idea of 'revolution' as the intellectual's bookish pursuit threatens to tear the delicate seam between aesthetics and politics. It seeks to poison the gap between the idealism fuelling the intellectual's retreat and the brute fact of everyday politics from which they have the luxury to escape. It seeks to discredit the revolutionary impulses at the heart of the vital cultural practices, be they in the fields of film, literature, music or the visual arts. And part of that 'revolution' is a struggle to speak or perform outside of prevailing discourse. The source of intrigue in the quote finally turns out to lie just here in the affront to the notion of the intellectual's retreat, desires and ideals. It is this that is worth defending. But it is not simply to defend this principle against a chance encounter with a quote all those years ago. It is to recognize that its negative presence can be found at the heart of much critical theory today. I speak of a critical tendency to draw quickly any cultural production into the orbit of its own social and political concerns. In so doing, the realms of aesthetics and politics are collapsed on grounds favouring the latter. It is also to recognize – and here I finally move closer to my own domain of art criticism – of how much visual art can now be produced to work within, or at best, agitate, those more limited critical frameworks of which I speak. It seems easier to write about those artworks carefully tuned to contemporary critical discourse than it is to those images with an eloquence that seems best respected by silence. I will resist the tragic dimension therein when I assert that the value of art criticism lies in tending to the latter.

I recognize some of what has been said in T. J. Clark's defence of what he calls his experiment in art writing in *Sight of Death* (2006). Clark's commitment to study two works by Poussin in great detail ('a small, sealed realm of visualizations dwelt in fiercely for their own sake, on their own terms'[18]) is shadowed by a form of critique common to much thinking on the Left. This is one that would seek to undermine Clark's project on grounds of its lack of political commitment. Clark articulates a defence despite the fact that this research overlapped with his involvement with the Retort collective's critique of global politics in *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (2005). For Clark, his separation of the aesthetic and the political ('at present the torn halves of a totality to which, however, they do not add up'[19]) is a better alternative to so much on offer from the 'Left academy':

> *Which is to say, a constant, cursory hauling of visual (and verbal) images before the court of political judgement – with the politics deployed by the prosecution usually as undernourished and instrumentalized as the account given of what the image in question might have to "say".*[20]

Clark discovers an ability in these seventeenth century paintings to speak 'to the image-world we presently inhabit, and whose politics we need such (reactionary) mirrors to see'.[21] Clark, long seen as a key figure in the social history of art, recognizes his tensions with that discipline he is associated with. One senses the dynamics of retreat and return at the heart of the pastoral genre repeated in Clark's journey. The strength of Poussin's two works is found in the knowledge of dreaming on the cusp of an impossible realm.

I also recognize a defence of the writer's retreat, desires and ideals against more caustic forms of criticism on the left. This defence can be found in Eagleton's work, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2003). Here, courting the notion of passivity and indifference as a legitimate reaction to enduring forms of political stasis, Eagleton makes the following claim:

> *… there is much about our species-being which is passive, constrained and inert. But this may be a source of radical politics, not an obstacle to it. Our passivity, for example, is closely bound up with our frailty and vulnerability, in which any authentic politics must be anchored. Tragedy can be among other things a symbolic coming to terms with our finitude and frailty, without which any political project is bound to flounder.*[22]

Once again, Eagleton, like Clark, courts an ideal fraternity between the aesthetic and political domains. The dynamics of retreat and return from which they operate are a useful antidote to indifference. And it should be remembered, Weizman saw the threat to the democratic order lying in the destruction of the spatial syntax of the separation between 'public and private' and between 'retreat and exclusion'. George Steiner, in an essay explaining why he writes so little of his political views, speaks of his hopes for 'some safeguard for the mutinous privacies of that 'party of one". Describing himself as a Platonic anarchist, he concedes 'it is not a winning ticket'.[23] It is on similar grounds I make a case for that bookish realm with its deep connection to that revolutionary impulse, the pleasures of discourse and, indeed, the pastoral retreat, secure in the knowledge that I am not alone. I sense some epicurean philosophy awaits me for my summer read. Will I be able to sit beneath a great elm, without apology, and read gently in dappled light? If not, I'll simply nap.

(Endnotes)

1 Richard Wollheim, *Freud (Second Edition)*, Fontana, 1991.
2 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*, 1843-4.
3 Ibid.
4 Slavoj Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes*, Verso, 2008, p.435.
5 Ibid., p.439.
6 Ibid., p.361.
7 See, Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, Routledge, 2002, p.94.
8 Eric Alliez, Claire Colebrook, Peter Hallward, Nicolas Thoburn, Jeremy Gilbert (Chair), 'Deleuzian Politics? A Roundtable Discussion', New Formations, issue 68, Autumn 2009, p.152.
9 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, Columbia University Press, 1995, p.171.
10 See, Peter Hallward, in 'Deleuzian Politics?', op. cit., p.144.
11 Eyal Weizman, 'Walking through Walls: Soldiers as Architects in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict', Radical Philosophy, No.136, March/April 2006, p.20.
12 Thomas Carlyle, 'Chartism' (1840), quoted in, Raymond Williams, 'Tragedy and Revolution' (1966), in, ed. John Higgins, *The Raymond Williams Reader*, Blackwell, 2001, p.106.
13 Raymond Williams, 'Tragedy and Revolution', op. cit., p.98.
14 Ibid., p.103.
15 Ibid., p.108.
16 Ibid.
17 Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Blackwell, 2003, p.xv.
18 T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*, Yale University Press, 2006, p.viii.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence,* op.cit.,p.xv.
23 George Steiner, 'Begging the Question', in, *My Unwritten Books*, Phoenix, 2009, p.186.