

NUDITIES

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Crossing Aesthetics

Werner Hamacher

Editor

NUDITIES

Translated by David Kishik
and Stefan Pedatella

Giorgio Agamben

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Translators' Note

English translations of secondary sources have been silently modified in order to take into account both the original texts and Agamben's own Italian translations of these sources.

Mandelstam's poem on pages 12–13 was translated from the Russian by Jane Mikkelson.

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§ I Creation and Salvation

1. Prophets disappear early on in Western history. If it is true that Judaism cannot be understood without the figure of the *nabi*, if the prophetic books occupy, in every sense, a central place in the Bible, it is just as true that early on there are already forces at work within Judaism that tend to limit the practice and the time frame of prophetism. The rabbinical tradition therefore tends to confine prophetism to an idealized past that concludes with the destruction of the First Temple in 587 BC. As the rabbis teach, "After the death of the last prophets—Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi—the holy spirit departed from Israel, though heavenly messages continue to reach them through the *bat kol*" (literally, "the voice's daughter," that is, the oral tradition, as well as the commentary on, and interpretation of, the Torah).¹ In the same way, Christianity recognizes the essential function of prophecy and, indeed, constructs the relationship between the Old and New Testaments in prophetic terms. But inasmuch as the Messiah appeared on earth and fulfilled the promise, the prophet no longer has any reason to exist, and so Paul, Peter, and their companions present themselves as apostles (that is, "those who are sent forth"), never as prophets. For this reason, within the Christian tradition, those who claim to be prophets cannot but be looked upon by the orthodoxy with suspicion. In this vein, those who wish to somehow link themselves to prophecy can do so only through the interpretation of the

Scriptures, by reading them in a new way, or restoring their lost original meaning. In Judaism as in Christianity, hermeneutics has replaced prophetism; one can practice prophecy only in the form of interpretation.

Naturally, the prophet has not altogether disappeared from Western culture. He continues his labor discretely, under various guises, perhaps even outside the hermeneutical sphere properly understood. And so Aby Warburg classified Nietzsche and Jacob Burckhardt as two opposing types of *nabi*: the former directed toward the future, the latter toward the past. Similarly, Michel Foucault, in his lecture from February 1, 1984, at the Collège de France, distinguished between four figures of truth-tellers in the ancient world: the prophet, the sage, the expert, and the parrhesiast. In the subsequent lecture he sought to retrace their descendants in the history of modern philosophy. But it still remains the case that, generally speaking, no one would feel immediately comfortable today claiming the position of prophet.

2. It is well known that in Islam the prophet performs possibly an even more essential function. Not only the usual biblical prophets, but also Abraham, Moses, and Jesus are defined in Islam as prophets. Nevertheless, even in this tradition, Muhammad, the prophet par excellence, is considered the "seal of prophecy," he who has definitively closed with his book the history of prophetism (which continues secretly even here through commentary on, and interpretation of, the Koran).

It is significant, however, that the Islamic tradition inextricably links the figure and function of the prophet to one of the two works or actions of God. According to this doctrine there are two different kinds of work or praxis (*sunnah*): the work of creation and the work of salvation (or the Command). Prophets correspond to the latter; they function as mediators for eschatological salvation. Angels correspond to the former; they represent the work of creation (of which Iblis—the angel who had been originally entrusted with the earthly kingdom before refusing to worship Adam—is the cipher). "God," Shahrastānī writes, "has two

kinds of work or praxis: one has to do with his creation, the other with his Command. . . . Prophets function as mediators who affirm the work of the Command, while angels function as mediators who affirm the work of creation. And since the Command is nobler than creation, the mediator of the Command [that is, the prophet] is nobler than the mediator of creation."²

In Christian theology the two works, united in God, are assigned to two different figures in the Trinity: the Father and the Son, the omnipotent creator and the redeemer, into whom God emptied his force. What is decisive in the Islamic tradition, however, is that the status of redemption precedes the status of creation, that what seems to follow is actually anterior. Salvation is not a remedy for the Fall of created beings but rather that which makes creation comprehensible, what gives it its sense. For this reason, in Islam the light of the prophet is considered the first among all beings (just as in the Jewish tradition the name of the Messiah was created before the creation of the world, and in Christianity the Son—though born from the Father—is consubstantial and coeval with him). Nothing expresses the priority of the work of salvation over that of creation better than the fact that salvation is presented as an exigent demand for reparation, one that precedes the appearance of any wrongdoing in the created world. "When God created the angels," recites a *hadith*, "they raised their heads toward heaven and asked: 'Lord, who are you with?' He responded: 'I am with those who are victims of injustice, until their rights are restored.'"

3. Scholars have examined the meaning of the two works of God, which appear together in only one verse of the Koran ("To Him belong the creation and the Command" [7:54]). According to some interpreters, the verse treats the intimate contradiction that opposes a creator God with a savior God in monotheistic religions (or, in Gnostic and Marcionite versions, which accentuate the opposition, a malicious Demiurge, creator of the world, in contrast with a God who is alien to the world, and from whom proceeds redemption and salvation). Whatever the origin of the

two works may be, it is certain that not only in Islam do creation and salvation establish the two poles of divine action. And if it is true that God is the place where humans think through their decisive problems, then these are also the two poles of human action.

All the more interesting, then, is the relationship that ties the two works together: they are distinct and even oppose one another, but they are nevertheless inextricable. Those who act and produce must also save and redeem their creation. It is not enough to do; one must know how to save that which one has done. In fact, the task of salvation precedes the task of creation; it is almost as if the only legitimization for doing and producing were the capacity to redeem that which has been done and produced.

What is truly singular in every human existence is the silent and impervious intertwining of the two works, the extremely close and yet disjointed proceeding of the prophetic word and the creative word, of the power of the angel (with which we never cease producing and looking ahead) and the power of the prophet (that just as tirelessly retrieves, undoes, and arrests the progress of creation and in this way completes and redeems it). And just as singular is the time that ties the two works together, the rhythm according to which creation precedes redemption but in reality follows it, as redemption follows creation but in truth precedes it.

4. In both Islam and Judaism, the work of salvation—though it precedes the work of creation in its degree of importance—is entrusted to a created being: the prophet or the Messiah (in Christianity, this idea is attested to by the fact that the Son, although consubstantial with the Father, was generated, though not created, by him). The above-cited passage from Shahrastānī continues, as a matter of fact, with these words: “And this is worthy of marvel: that the spiritual beings [the angels], though proceeding directly from the Command, have become mediators of creation, while the corporeal, created beings [the prophets] have become mediators of the Command.”³ What is indeed marvelous here is that the redemption of creation is entrusted not to the creator (nor to the angels, who proceed directly from the creative power) but to

a created being. This means that creation and salvation remain somehow foreign to one another, that it is not the principle of creation within us that will be able to save what we have produced. Nevertheless, that which can and must save the work of creation results and arises from it. That which precedes in rank and dignity derives from that which is its inferior.

This means that what will save the world is not the spiritual, angelic power (a power that is, in the final analysis, demonic), with which humans produce their works (whether they be technical or artistic works, works of war or peace), but a more humble and corporeal power, which humans have insofar as they are created beings. But this also means that the two powers somehow coincide in the prophet, that the custodian of the work of salvation belongs, as far as his being is concerned, to creation.

5. In modern culture philosophy and criticism have inherited the prophetic work of salvation (that formerly, in the sacred sphere, had been entrusted to exegesis); poetry, technology, and art are the inheritors of the angelic work of creation. Through the process of secularization of the religious tradition, however, these disciplines have progressively lost all memory of the relationship that had previously linked them so intimately to one another. Hence the complicated and almost schizophrenic character that seems to mark this relationship. Once, the poet knew how to account for his poetry (“To open it through prose,” as Dante puts it), and the critic was also a poet.⁴ Now, the critic has lost access to the work of creation and thus gets revenge by presuming to judge it, while the poet no longer knows how to save his own work and thus discounts this incapacity by blindly consigning himself to the frivolity of the angel. The fact is that these two works—which appear autonomous and independent of one another—are in reality two faces of the same divine power, and they coincide, at least as far as the prophet is concerned, within a single being. The work of creation is, in truth, only a spark that has detached itself from the prophetic work of salvation, and the work of salvation is only a fragment of the angelic creation that has become conscious of

itself. The prophet is an angel who, in the very impulse that spurs him into action, suddenly feels in his living flesh the thorn of a different exigency. This is why the ancient biographies tell us that Plato was originally a tragic poet who, while heading to the theater to have his trilogy performed, heard Socrates' voice and decided to burn his tragedies.

6. Just as genius and talent—originally distinct and even opposite—are nevertheless united in the work of the poet, so the work of creation and the work of salvation, inasmuch as they represent the two powers of a single God, remain in some way secretly conjoined. What determines the status of the work is, however, once again, not a result of creation and talent but of the signature imprinted on it by genius and by salvation. This signature is style: the counterforce, as it were, that resists and undoes creation from within, the countermelody that silences the inspired angel. Vice versa, in the work of the prophet, style is the signature that creation—in the very act of being saved—leaves on salvation; it is the opacity and almost the insolence with which creation resists its redemption, with which it seeks to remain utterly night, utterly creaturely, and in this way to bestow its tenor on thought.

A critical or philosophical work that does not possess some sort of an essential relationship with creation is condemned to pointless idling, just as a work of art or poetry that does not contain within it a critical exigency is destined for oblivion. Today, however, separated into two different subjects as they are, the two divine *sunnah* search desperately for a meeting point, for a threshold of indifference, where their lost unity can be rediscovered. They do this by exchanging their roles, which nevertheless remain implacably divided. At the moment when, for the first time, the problem of the separation between poetry and philosophy forcefully emerges in our consciousness, Hölderlin describes philosophy (in a letter to Neuffer) as a "hospital in which the unfortunate poet can take refuge with honor."⁵ In our day the hospital of philosophy has closed its shutters. Critics, transformed into "curators," heedlessly take the place of artists in order to simulate the work of creation

that the latter have abandoned, while artisans, who have become inoperative, dedicate themselves with great zeal to a work of redemption in which there is no longer any work to save. In both cases creation and salvation no longer scratch onto one another the signature of their tenacious, amorous conflict. Unsigned and divided, they place each other in front of a mirror in which they cannot recognize themselves.

7. What is the sense of this division of divine—and human—praxis into two works? If in the final analysis it is true that, despite the difference in their status, the mutual roots of the two works seem to stem from a common terrain or substance, what does their unity consist of? Perhaps the only way to lead them back once again to their common root is by thinking of the work of salvation as that aspect of the power to create that was left unpracticed by the angel and thus can turn back on itself. Just as potentiality anticipates the act and exceeds it, so the work of redemption precedes that of creation. Nevertheless, redemption is nothing other than a potentiality to create that remains pending, that turns on itself and "saves" itself. But what is the meaning of "saving" in this context? After all, there is nothing in creation that is not ultimately destined to be lost: not only the part of each and every moment that must be lost and forgotten—the daily squandering of tiny gestures, of minute sensations, of that which passes through the mind in a flash, of trite and wasted words, all of which exceed by great measure the mercy of memory and the archive of redemption—but also the works of art and ingenuity, the fruits of a long and patient labor that, sooner or later, are condemned to disappear.

It is over this immemorial mass, over the unformed and immense chaos of what must be lost that, according to the Islamic tradition, Iblis, the angel that has eyes only for the work of creation, cries incessantly. He cries because he does not know that what one loses actually belongs to God, that when all the work of creation has been forgotten, when all signs and words have become illegible, only the work of salvation will remain indelible.

8. What is a "saved" potentiality, this power to do (and to not do) that does not simply pass into actuality, so as to exhaust itself in it, but rather conserves itself and dwells (it is "saved") as such within the work? The work of salvation coincides here point for point with the work of creation: the former undoes and decreates the latter at the very same moment it carries and accompanies it into being. There is neither gesture nor word, neither color nor timbre, neither desire nor gaze that salvation does not suspend and render inoperative in its amorous struggle with the work. That which the angel forms, produces, and caresses, the prophet brings back to an unformed state and contemplates. His eyes observe that which is saved but only inasmuch as it will be lost on the last day. And just as a loved one is all of a sudden present in our memory, but only on the condition that he or she is disembodied and turned into an image, so the work of creation is now intimately meshed in every last detail with nonbeing.

But what, then, is saved here, exactly? Not the created being, because it is lost, because it cannot but be lost. Not the potentiality, because it has no consistency other than the decreation of the work. Instead, the created being and the potentiality now enter into a threshold in which they can no longer be in any way distinguished from one another. This means that the ultimate figure of human and divine action appears where creation and salvation coincide in the unsavable. This coincidence can be achieved only if the prophet has nothing to save and the angel has nothing else to do. Unsavable, therefore, is that work in which creation and salvation, action and contemplation, operation and inoperativity [*inoperosità*] persist in every moment and, without leaving any residue, in the same being (and in the same nonbeing). Hence its opaque splendor, which vertiginously distances itself from us like a star that will never return.

9. The crying angel turns itself into a prophet, while the lament of the poet for creation becomes critical prophecy, that is to say, philosophy. But precisely now—when the work of salvation seems to gather within itself as unforgettable everything that is im-

memorial—even this work is transformed. It remains, of course, because, as opposed to creation, the work of redemption is eternal. To the extent that salvation has survived creation, its exigency is not, however, exhausted in the saved but rather lost in the unsavable. Born from a creation that is left pending, it ends up as an inscrutable salvation that no longer has an objective.

This is the reason why it is said that the supreme knowledge is that which comes too late, when we no longer have any use for it. This knowledge, which has survived our works, is the last and most precious fruit of our lives, though somehow it no longer concerns us, like the geography of a country that we are about to leave behind. Until humans learn to dedicate to it their most beautiful feast day, their eternal Sabbath, this supreme knowledge will remain a personal matter, which one attends to hurriedly and quietly. And thus we are left with the strange sensation of finally understanding the meaning of the two works, of their inexplicable division, and of our subsequent lack of anything else to say.

§ 2 What Is the Contemporary?

1. The question that I would like to inscribe on the threshold of this seminar¹ is, "Of whom and of what are we contemporaries?" And, first and foremost, "What does it mean to be contemporary?" In the course of this seminar we will have occasion to read texts whose authors are many centuries removed from us, as well as others that are more recent, or even very recent. At all events it is essential that we manage to be in some way contemporaries of these texts. The "time" of our seminar is contemporariness, and as such it makes an exigent demand that it be contemporary with the texts and the authors it examines. To a great degree, the success of this seminar may be evaluated by its—by our—capacity to measure up to this exigency.

An initial, provisional indication that may orient our search for an answer to the above questions comes from Nietzsche. Roland Barthes summarizes this answer in a note from his lectures at the Collège de France: "The contemporary is the untimely." In 1874 Friedrich Nietzsche, a young philologist who had worked up to that point on Greek texts and had two years earlier achieved an unexpected celebrity with *The Birth of Tragedy*, published the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, the *Untimely Meditations*, a work in which he tries to come to terms with his time and take a position with regard to the present. "This meditation is itself untimely," we read at the beginning of the second meditation, "because it

seeks to understand as an illness, a disability, and a defect something which this epoch is quite rightly proud of, that is to say, its historical culture, because I believe that we are all consumed by the fever of history and we should at least realize it."² In other words Nietzsche situates his own claim for "relevance" [*attualità*], his "contemporariness" with respect to the present, in a disconnection and out-of-jointness. Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant [*inattuale*]. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time.

Naturally, this noncoincidence, this "dys-chrony," does not mean that the contemporary is a person who lives in another time, a nostalgic who feels more at home in the Athens of Pericles or in the Paris of Robespierre and the marquis de Sade than in the city and the time in which he lives. An intelligent man can despise his time, while knowing that he nevertheless irrevocably belongs to it, that he cannot escape his own time.

Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*. Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it.

2. In 1923 Osip Mandelstam writes a poem entitled "The Century" (though the Russian word *vek* also means "epoch" or "age"). The poem does not contain a reflection on the century but rather a reflection on the relation between the poet and his time, that is to say, on contemporariness. Not "the century," but, according to the words that open the first verse, "my century" or "my age" (*vek moi*):

My century, my beast, who will manage
to look inside your eyes
and weld together with his own blood
the vertebrae of two centuries?

The poet, who must pay for his contemporariness with his life, is he who must firmly lock his gaze onto the eyes of his century-beast, who must weld with his own blood the shattered backbone of time. The two centuries, the two times, are not only, as has been suggested, the nineteenth and twentieth but also, more to the point, the length of a single individual's life (remember that *saeculum* originally means the period of a person's life) and the collective historical period that we call in this case the twentieth century. As we learn in the last strophe of the poem, the backbone of this century is shattered. The poet, insofar as he is contemporary, *is* this fracture, *is* at once that which impedes time from composing itself and the blood that must suture this break or this wound. The parallelism between the time and the vertebrae of the creature, on the one hand, and the time and the vertebrae of the century, on the other, constitutes one of the essential themes of the poem:

So long as the creature lives
it must carry forth its vertebrae,
as the waves play along
with an invisible spine.
Like a child's tender cartilage
is the century of the newborn earth.

The other great theme—and this, like the preceding one, is also an image of contemporariness—is that of the shattering, as well as of the welding, of the century's vertebrae, both of which are the work of a single individual (in this case, the poet):

To wrest the century away from bondage
so as to start the world anew
one must tie together with a flute
the knees of all the knotted days.

That this is an impossible task—or at any rate a paradoxical one—

is proven by the following strophe with which the poem concludes. Not only does the epoch-beast have broken vertebrae, but *vek*, the newborn century, wants to turn around (an impossible gesture for a person with a broken backbone) in order to contemplate its own tracks and, in this way, to display its demented face:

But your backbone has been shattered
O my wondrous, wretched century.
With a senseless smile
like a beast that was once limber
you look back, weak and cruel,
to contemplate your own tracks.

3. The poet—the contemporary—must firmly hold his gaze on his own time. But what does he who sees his time actually see? What is this demented grin on the face of his century? I would like at this point to propose a second definition of contemporariness. The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure. The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present. But what does it mean “to see an obscurity,” “to perceive the darkness”?

The neurophysiology of vision suggests an initial answer. What happens when we find ourselves in a place deprived of light or when we close our eyes? What is the darkness that we see then? Neurophysiologists tell us that the absence of light activates a series of peripheral cells in the retina called “off-cells.” When activated, these cells produce the particular kind of vision that we call darkness. Darkness is not, therefore, a privative notion (the simple absence of light, or something like nonvision) but rather the result of the activity of the “off-cells,” a product of our own retina. This means, if we now return to our thesis on the darkness of contemporariness, that to perceive this darkness is not a form of inertia or of passivity. Rather, it implies an activity and a singular ability. In our case this ability amounts to a neutralization of the lights that

come from the epoch in order to discover its obscurity, its special darkness, which is not, however, separable from those lights.

The ones who can call themselves contemporary are only those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century and so manage to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights, of their intimate obscurity. Having said this much, we have nevertheless still not addressed our question. Why should we be at all interested in perceiving the obscurity that emanates from the epoch? Is darkness not precisely an anonymous experience that is by definition impenetrable, something that is not directed at us and thus cannot concern us? On the contrary, the contemporary is the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him. Darkness is something that—more than any light—turns directly and singularly toward him. The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time.

4. In the firmament that we observe at night, the stars shine brightly, surrounded by a thick darkness. Since the number of galaxies and luminous bodies in the universe is almost infinite, the darkness that we see in the sky is something that, according to scientists, demands an explanation. It is precisely the explanation that contemporary astrophysics gives for this darkness that I would now like to discuss. In an expanding universe the most remote galaxies move away from us at a speed so great that their light is never able to reach us. What we perceive as the darkness of the heavens is this light that, though traveling toward us, cannot reach us, since the galaxies from which the light originates move away from us at a velocity greater than the speed of light. To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot—this is what it means to be contemporary. As such, contemporaries are rare. And for this reason, to be contemporary is, first and foremost, a question of courage, because it means being able not only to firmly fix one's gaze on the darkness of the epoch but also to perceive in this darkness a light

that, while directed toward us, infinitely distances itself from us. In other words it is like being on time for an appointment that one cannot but miss.

This is the reason why the present that contemporariness perceives has broken vertebrae. Our time, the present, is in fact not only the most distant: it cannot in any way reach us. Its backbone is broken and we find ourselves in the exact point of this fracture. This is why we are, despite everything, contemporaries. It is important to realize that the appointment that is in question in contemporariness does not simply take place in chronological time: it is something that, working within chronological time, urges, presses, and transforms it. And this urgency is the untimeliness, the anachronism that permits us to grasp our time in the form of a "too soon" that is also a "too late"—of an "already" that is also a "not yet." Moreover, it allows us to recognize in the obscurity of the present the light that, without ever being able to reach us, is perpetually voyaging toward us.

5. A good example of this special experience of time that we call contemporariness is fashion. Fashion can be defined as the introduction into time of a peculiar discontinuity that divides it according to its relevance or irrelevance, its being-in-fashion or its no-longer-being-in-fashion. This caesura, as subtle as it may be, is remarkable in the sense that those who need to make note of it do so infallibly, and in so doing they attest to their own being in fashion. But if we try to objectify and fix this caesura within chronological time, it reveals itself as ungraspable. In the first place the "now" of fashion, the instant in which it comes into being, is not identifiable via any kind of chronometer. Is this "now" perhaps the moment in which the fashion designer conceives of the general concept, the nuance that will define the new style of the clothes? Or is it the moment when the fashion designer conveys the concept to his assistants and then to the tailor who will sew the prototype? Or, rather, is it the moment of the fashion show, when the clothes are worn by the only people who are always and only in fashion, the mannequins or models—those who nonetheless,

precisely for this reason, are never truly in fashion?³ In this last instance, the being in fashion of the "style" will depend on the fact that the people of flesh and blood, rather than the mannequins (those sacrificial victims of a faceless god), will recognize it as such and choose that style for their own wardrobe.

The time of fashion, therefore, constitutively anticipates itself and consequently is also always too late. It always takes the form of an ungraspable threshold between a "not yet" and a "no more." It is quite probable that, as the theologians suggest, this constellation depends on the fact that fashion, at least in our culture, is a theological signature of clothing, which derives from the first piece of clothing that was sewn by Adam and Eve after the Original Sin, in the form of a loincloth woven from fig leaves. (To be precise, the clothes that we wear do not derive from this vegetal loincloth but from the *tunicae pelliceae*, the clothes made from animals' skin that God, according to Genesis 3:21, gave to our progenitors as a tangible symbol of sin and death in the moment he expelled them from Paradise.) In any case, whatever the reason may be, the "now," the *kairos* of fashion, is ungraspable: the phrase, "I am in this instant in fashion" is contradictory because the moment in which the subject pronounces it, he is already out of fashion. So, being in fashion, like contemporariness, entails a certain "ease," a certain quality of being out-of-phase or out-of-date, in which one's relevance includes within itself a small part of what lies outside of itself, a shade of *démodé*, of being out of fashion. It is in this sense that it was said of an elegant lady in nineteenth-century Paris, "Elle est contemporaine de tout le monde" (She is everybody's contemporary).⁴

But the temporality of fashion has another character that relates it to contemporariness. Following the same gesture by which the present divides time according to a "no more" and a "not yet," it also establishes a peculiar relationship with these "other times"—certainly with the past and perhaps also with the future. Fashion can therefore "cite," and in this way make relevant again, any moment from the past (the 1920s, the 1970s, but also the neoclassical or empire style). It can therefore tie together that which it has

inexorably divided—recall, re-evoke, and revitalize that which it had declared dead.

6. There is another aspect to this special relationship with the past. Contemporariness inscribes itself in the present by marking it above all as archaic. Only those who perceive the indices and signatures of the archaic in the most modern and recent can be contemporary. *Archaic* means close to the *arkhē*, that is to say, the origin. But the origin is not only situated in a chronological past: it is contemporary with historical becoming and does not cease to operate within it, just as the embryo continues to be active in the tissues of the mature organism, and the child in the psychic life of the adult. Both this distancing and nearness, which define contemporariness, have their foundation in this proximity to the origin that nowhere pulses with more force than in the present. Whoever has seen the skyscrapers of New York for the first time from the ocean at dawn has immediately perceived this archaic *facies* of the present, this contiguousness with the ruin that the atemporal images of 9/11 have made evident to all.

Historians of literature and of art know that there is a secret affinity between the archaic and the modern, not so much because the archaic forms seem to exercise a particular charm on the present but rather because the key to the modern is hidden in the immemorial and the prehistoric. Thus, the ancient world in its decline turns to the primordial so as to rediscover itself. The avant-garde, which has lost itself over time, also pursues the primitive and the archaic. It is in this sense that one can say that the entry point to the present necessarily takes the form of an archaeology that does not, however, regress to a historical past but returns to that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living. What remains un-lived is therefore incessantly sucked back toward the origin without ever being able to reach it. The present is nothing other than this un-lived element in everything that is lived. That which impedes access to the present is precisely the mass of what for some reason (its traumatic character, its excessive nearness) we have not managed to live. The attention to this "un-lived"

is the life of the contemporary. And to be contemporary means in this sense to return to a present where we have never been.

7. Those who have tried to think about contemporariness have been able to do so only by splitting it up into several times, by introducing into time an essential dishomogeneity. Those who say "my time" actually divide time—they inscribe into it a caesura and a discontinuity. But precisely by means of this caesura, this interpolation of the present into the inert homogeneity of linear time, the contemporary puts to work a special relationship between the different times. If, as we have seen, it is the contemporary who has broken the vertebrae of his time (or, at any rate, who has perceived in it a fault line or a breaking point), then he also makes of this fracture a meeting place or an encounter between times and generations. There is nothing more exemplary, in this sense, than Paul's gesture at the point in which he experiences and announces to his brothers the contemporariness par excellence that is messianic time, the being-contemporary with the Messiah, which he calls precisely the "time of the now" (*ho nyn kairos*). Not only is this time chronologically indeterminate (the *parousia*, the return of Christ that signals the end is certain and near, though not at a calculable point), but it also has the singular capacity of putting every instant of the past in direct relationship with itself, of making every moment or episode of biblical history a prophecy or a prefiguration (Paul prefers the term *typos*, figure) of the present (thus Adam, through whom humanity received death and sin, is a "type" or figure of the Messiah, who brings about redemption and life to human beings).

This means that the contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; the contemporary is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times. He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to "cite it" according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond. It is as if this invisible light that is the darkness of

the present cast its shadow on the past so that the past, touched by this shadow, acquired the ability to respond to the darkness of the now. It is something along these lines that Michel Foucault probably had in mind when he wrote that his historical investigations of the past are only the shadow cast by his theoretical interrogation of the present. Similarly, Walter Benjamin writes that the historical index contained in the images of the past indicates that these images may achieve legibility only in a determined moment of their history. It is on our ability to respond to this exigency and to this shadow, to be contemporaries not only of our century and the "now" but also of its figures in the texts and documents of the past, that the success or failure of our seminar depends.

Kalumniator

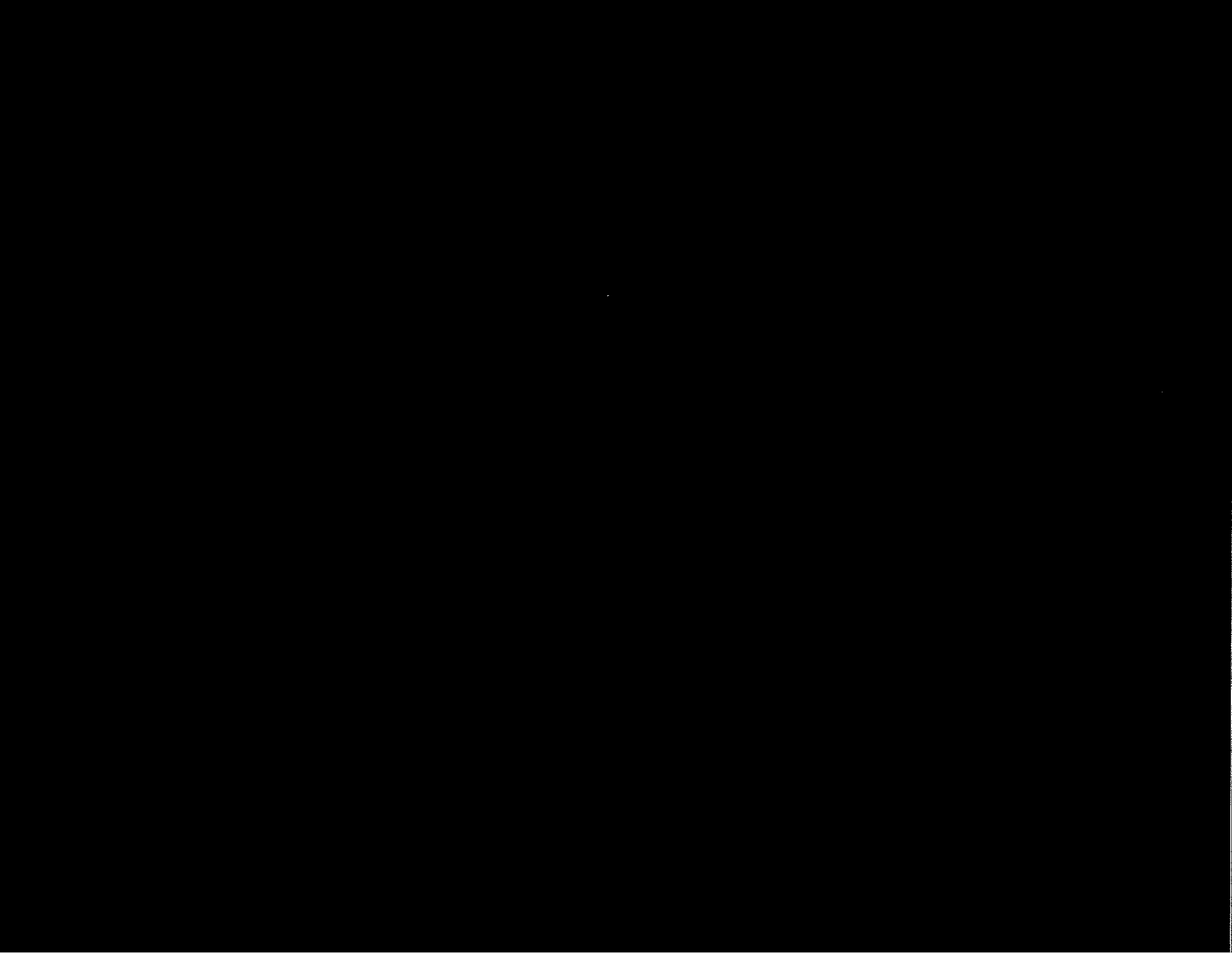
1. In Roman trials, where public prosecution played a limited role, slander represented a threat so grave for the administration of justice that the false accuser was punished by marking his forehead with the letter *K* (initial of *kalumniator*, slanderer). It is the merit of Davide Stimilli to have demonstrated the importance of this fact for the interpretation of Kafka's *The Trial*, whose incipit unambiguously presents it as a slanderous trial ("Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested").¹ By calling our attention to the fact that Kafka had studied the history of Roman law while he was preparing for the legal profession, Stimilli suggests that K. does not stand (according to an opinion that dates back to Max Brod) for "Kafka" but for slander.²

2. That slander represents the key to the novel—and, perhaps, to the entire Kafkaesque universe, so potently marked by the mythic forces of law—becomes, however, even more illuminating if we observe the following point: at the moment when the letter *K* ceases to stand simply for *kalumnia* (the false accusation) but refers rather to *kalumniator* (the false accuser), this can only mean that the false accuser is the very protagonist of the novel, who has

begun a slanderous trial against himself, as it were. The "someone" (*jemand*) who, with his slander, has initiated the trial is Josef K. himself.

This is precisely what an attentive reading of the novel demonstrates beyond all doubt. Even though K. actually knows right from the start that there is no way to be completely certain that he has been accused by the court ("I don't know if you have been accused," the inspector tells him during his first interview),³ and that at any rate his condition of being "under arrest" does not imply any change in his life, he still tries in every conceivable way to penetrate the court buildings (which are not actually court buildings but rather attics, storage rooms, or laundry rooms—which, perhaps, are only transformed into courts by his gaze) and to instigate a trial that the judges do not seem to have any intention of initiating. That this is not even a real trial for that matter, but that the trial exists only to the extent that K. recognizes it as such, is something that K. himself anxiously concedes to the examining magistrate during the initial inquiry. Nevertheless, he does not hesitate to present himself to the court even when it has not been convened, and it is precisely at this moment that he unnecessarily admits to having been accused. Similarly, he does not hesitate to suggest during his conversation with Miss Bürstner that she should falsely accuse him of assault (in a certain sense, he therefore self-slanders). In the final analysis this is precisely what the prison chaplain informs K. of at the conclusion of their long conversation in the cathedral: "The court wants nothing from you. It receives you when you come and dismisses you when you go."⁴ In other words, "the court does not accuse you; it only gathers the accusations that you make against yourself."

3. Every man initiates a slanderous trial against himself. This is Kafka's point of departure. Hence his universe cannot be tragic but only comic: guilt does not exist—or rather, guilt is nothing other than self-slander, which consists in accusing oneself of a non-existent guilt (that is, of one's very innocence, which is the comic gesture par excellence).



This is in tune with the principle, enunciated elsewhere by Kafka, according to which "original sin, the ancient fault committed by man, consists in the accusation that he makes and from which he does not desist: that a wrong has been done to him, that an original sin has been committed against him."⁵ As is the case with slander, guilt is not the cause of the accusation here, but rather is identified with it.

As a matter of fact, slander exists only if the accuser is convinced of the innocence of the accused, only if he accuses without there being any guilt to ascertain. In the case of self-slander this conviction becomes at once both necessary and impossible. The accused, insofar as he is a self-slanderer, knows perfectly well that he is innocent, but, insofar as he is accusing himself, he knows just as well that he is guilty of slander, that he deserves to be marked. This is the Kafkaesque situation par excellence. But why does K.—why does every man—slander and falsely accuse himself?

4. Roman jurists considered slander to be an accusation that has been led astray (they used the term *temeritas*, from *temere*, "blindly, randomly," which is etymologically linked to the Italian *tenebra*, darkness). Mommsen observes that the verb *accusare* does not seem to be originally a technical juridical term, and in the most ancient testimonials (for example, in Plautus and Terence) it is used in a moral sense rather than a juridical one. But it is precisely in its liminal function with respect to the law that the accusation reveals its decisive importance.

The Roman trial opens with the *nominis delatio*, the inscription, at the behest of the accuser, of the name of the denounced person in the list of the accused. *Accusare* etymologically derives from *causa*, which means "to indict" [*chiamare in causa*]. *Causa* is, in a certain sense, the most fundamental juridical term because it names something that has been implicated within the sphere of law (just as *res* signifies something that has been implicated within the sphere of language). *Causa* indicates that which lies at the foundation of a juridical situation. The relationship between *causa* and *res* (which means "thing, affair" in Latin) is instructive

from this perspective. Both belong to the vocabulary of law, where they designate that which is in question in a trial (or in a juridical relationship). In Romance languages, however, *causa* progressively takes the place of *res*, and after it came to designate the unknown in algebraic terminology (just as in French, *res* survives only in the form of *rien*, nothing), *causa* gives way to the term *cosa* ("thing" in Italian, *chose* in French). *Cosa*—this thoroughly neutral and generic word—names, in reality, "what is the case [*in causa*]," what is at stake in law (and in language).

This is to suggest that the gravity of slander is a function of its ability to put into question the very principle of the trial: the moment of accusation. After all, what defines the trial is neither guilt (which is unnecessary in archaic law) nor punishment but rather the accusation. Indeed, the accusation is perhaps the juridical "category" par excellence (*kategoria* means "accusation" in Greek), without which the whole edifice of law would fall apart: the indictment of Being within the sphere of law. The law, then, is essentially an accusation or a "category." When Being is indicted, or "accused," within the sphere of law, it loses its innocence; it becomes a *cosa* (a thing), that is a *causa* (a case): an object of litigation (for the Romans *causa*, *res*, and *lis* were, in this sense, synonymous).

5. Self-slander is part of Kafka's strategy in his incessant struggle with the law. In the first place it calls guilt into question or, more precisely, the principle according to which there is no punishment without guilt. Along with this it also questions the accusation, which grounds itself in guilt (we can add the following to the catalogue of Brodian nonsensicalities: Kafka does not care about the question of grace but rather about the accusation, which is its opposite). "How can a man in general be guilty?" Josef K. asks the prison chaplain, who seems to concur, by saying that the sentence does not exist but that "the trial itself is transformed, little by little, into the sentence."⁶ In the same fashion a modern jurist has written that, in the mystery of the trial, the principle *nulla poena sine iudicio* is reversed and becomes a darker principle, according to

which there is no judgment without punishment, since all punishment lies in judgment. "To be in such a trial," says the uncle to K. at a certain point, "means to have already lost it."⁷

This point is evident in self-slander and, in general, in the slanderous trial. The slanderous trial is a case where there is no case, where being indicted is the indictment itself, the accusation as such. Where guilt consists in bringing about the trial, the sentence cannot be anything other than the trial itself.

6. In addition to slander, Roman jurists were aware of two other *temeritates* or "darkenings" of the accusation: *praevaricatio*, the collusion between accuser and accused (which is symmetrically opposed to slander), and the *tergiversatio*, the retraction of the accusation (for the Romans, who saw an analogy between war and trial, the retraction of the accusation was a form of desertion—*tergiversare* originally means "to turn one's back on something").

Josef K. is guilty of all three: because he slanders himself; because, inasmuch as he self-slanders, he colludes with himself; and because he is not in agreement with his own accusation (in this sense, he "tergiversates," he looks for a cop-out and stalls for time).

7. One understands, then, the subtlety of self-slander as a strategy that seeks to deactivate and render inoperative the accusation, the indictment that the law addresses toward Being. If the accusation is false, and if, moreover, the accuser coincides with the accused, then it is the fundamental implication of man within the sphere of law that is called here into question. The only way to affirm one's innocence before the law (and the powers that represent it: for example, the father, or marriage) is, in this sense, to falsely accuse oneself.

That slander can be a defense mechanism in the struggle with authority is clearly stated by the other K., the protagonist of *The Castle*: "It would be a relatively innocent, and in the end also quite insufficient, means of defense."⁸ Kafka is indeed completely aware of the insufficiency of this strategy, since the response of the law is to transform the indictment itself into a crime, and to turn self-

slander into its foundation. Not only does the law pronounce the condemnation at the very moment in which it recognizes the baselessness of the accusation, but it also transforms the self-slanderer's subterfuge into its perpetual self-justification. Since humans do not cease to slander themselves, as well as others, the law (that is, the trial) is necessary in order to assess which accusations are groundless and which are not. In this way the law can find its self-justification by presenting itself as a bulwark against the delirium of human beings' self-accusations (to some degree it has acted as such with regard to religion, for example). Even if man were always innocent, if no man in general can be called guilty, self-slander would still remain as original sin, as the baseless accusation that humanity directs at itself.

8. It is important to distinguish between self-slander and confession. When Leni tries to induce K. to make a confession, telling him that "the only chance [he has] to escape"⁹ is by confessing his guilt, K. hastily declines the offer. And yet, in a certain sense, the aim of the entire trial is to produce such a confession, which already in Roman law counts as a sort of self-condemnation. According to a juridical adage, the one who has confessed is already judged (*confessus pro iudicato*). The equivalence between confession and self-condemnation is affirmed without reservation by one of the most authoritative Roman jurists: whoever confesses condemns himself, so to speak (*quodammodo sua sententia damnatur*). But whoever falsely accuses himself—insofar as he has been accused—must face precisely for this reason the impossibility of confessing, and the court can condemn him as the accuser only if it recognizes his innocence as the accused.

In this sense K.'s strategy can be defined more precisely as the failed attempt to render the confession, but not the trial, impossible. Moreover, as a fragment from 1920 affirms, "to confess one's own guilt and to lie are the same thing. In order to be able to confess, one lies."¹⁰ Kafka, therefore, seems to inscribe himself into a tradition that—contrary to the favor that it enjoys in Judeo-Christian culture—decisively rejects confession: from Cicero, who

defines it as "repugnant and dangerous" (*turpis et periculosa*), to Proust, who candidly advises, "Don't ever confess" (*n'avouez jamais*).

9. In the history of confession the link with torture is particularly significant, a link that Kafka could hardly be insensitive to. While the law during the age of the republic accepted confession with some reservations as a way to defend the accused, during the age of the empire—above all for crimes against sovereign power (plots, betrayal, conspiracy, or impiety against the emperor) but also for adultery, magic, and illicit divination—the penal procedure entailed the torture of the accused and his slaves in order to extort from them a confession. "Wrest the truth" (*veritatem eruere*) is the insignia of the new judicial rationale that, by closely linking confession and truth, makes torture (which in cases of high treason extends even to witnesses) the probative instrument par excellence. Hence its designation as *quaestio* in juridical sources: torture is an inquiry into truth (*quaestio veritatis*), and this is how it will be then taken up by the medieval inquisition.

Introduced into the courtroom, the accused underwent an initial interrogation. After the first hesitations or contradictions, or even only because he declared himself innocent, the judge ordered the application of torture. The accused was spread out on his back on the rack (*cavalletto* in Italian or *eculeus* in Latin, meaning little horse, which relates to the German term for torture, *Folter*, deriving from *Fohlen*, "colt"), with arms extended backward and upward, and hands tied with a cord that passed through a pulley, in such a way that the executioner (*quaestionarius, tortor*) could pull the cord and cause the dislocation of the collarbone. This first stage, from which the name "torture" derives (from *torqueo*, "to torque or twist until shattering"), was usually followed by flogging, as well as laceration with iron hooks and harrows. The dogged search for truth was such that the torture could be prolonged for several days, until the confession was finally obtained.

Along with the diffusion of the practice of torture, confession

comes to internalize itself: from truth forcefully wrested by the executioner, it becomes something that the subject is compelled, by his own conscience, to declare spontaneously. Sources record with a sense of surprise cases of people who confess without being accused or after having been absolved in trial. But even in these cases the confession—inasmuch as it is the "voice of conscience" (*confessio conscientiae vox*)—nevertheless has probative value and implies the condemnation of the confessor.

10. It is precisely the essential link between torture and truth that seems to attract Kafka's attention in an almost morbid manner. "Yes, torture is of extreme importance for me," he writes in November 1920 to Milena Jesenská, "my sole occupation is being tortured and torturing. Why? . . . To learn how to force the cursed word out of the cursed mouth."¹¹ Two months prior, he attaches to his letter a slip of paper with a drawing of a torture machine of his own invention, whose function he clarifies with these words: "Once the man is tied in this way, the two poles get pushed slowly outward until he is split in two."¹² That torture may serve to extract a confession is confirmed by Kafka a few days earlier, when he compares his condition to that of a man whose head gets clamped in a vice with two screws at the temples: "The difference lies only in this: . . . that in order to scream I don't wait till they finish tightening the screws in order to extract the confession from me, but rather I start screaming already when they draw close."¹³

That this was not merely a passing interest is proved by the story "In the Penal Colony," which Kafka writes in just a few days in October 1914, while interrupting the composition of *The Trial*. The "apparatus" invented by the "old Commandant" is, in fact, at once a torture device and an instrument for the execution of capital punishment (the officer himself suggests this when, anticipating a possible objection, he says, "We haven't used torture since the Middle Ages").¹⁴ It is precisely inasmuch as it unites in itself these two functions that the punishment inflicted by the machine coincides with a particular *quaestio veritatis*, in which the discov-

ery of truth is entrusted not to the judge but to the accused, who does so by deciphering the writing that the harrow inscribes onto his flesh:

Even the most dull-witted ones begin to understand. It begins around the eyes and from there it spreads. It is a spectacle that could induce anyone to get under the harrow himself. Nothing else happens, except that the man begins to decipher the writing. He purses his lips as if he were listening. You have seen that it is not easy to decipher the writing with your eyes, but our man deciphers it with his wounds. It is difficult labor; it takes him six hours to complete. But by that time, the harrow has pierced him thoroughly and throws him into the ditch, where he falls down on the bloody water and cotton wool.¹⁵

II. "In the Penal Colony" was written during the composition of *The Trial*, and the situation of the condemned presents more than just an analogy with that of K. As K. does not know what he is accused of, so in the short story the condemned does not know that he has been condemned. He does not even know his sentence ("To communicate it to him," explains the officer, "would be useless. He will experience it on his own flesh").¹⁶ Both stories seem to conclude with the execution of a death sentence (one that, in the short story, the officer seems to inflict on himself instead of on the condemned). But it is precisely the obviousness of this conclusion that must be questioned. That what is at stake in the short story is not an execution, but only torture, is clearly stated precisely at the moment in which the machine breaks down and is no longer able to perform its function: "This was not the torture that the officer wanted to inflict, this was murder, plain and simple."¹⁷ The true aim of the machine is, therefore, torture as *quaestio veritatis*. Death, which often occurs during torture, is only a collateral effect of the discovery of truth. When the torture machine is no longer able to force the condemned to decipher the truth on his own flesh, torture gives way to simple homicide.

It is from this perspective that one must reread the final chapter of *The Trial*. Here, as well, we are not dealing with the execution of a sentence but with a scene of torture. The two men with top

hats, who look to K. like second-rate actors or even like "tenors," are not executioners in the technical sense but *quaestionarii* who are trying to get a confession that up until then no one had asked him for (if it is true that it was K. who falsely accused himself, then it is perhaps precisely the confession of such slander that they want to extract from him). This is confirmed by the curious description of their first physical contact with K., which recalls (though in a vertical position) the tension of the arms and the position of the accused during the *quaestio*: "They held their shoulders right behind his, didn't crook their arms, but instead wrapped them about the whole length of his, seizing K.'s hands below with a methodical, well-trained, and irresistible grip. K. walked along stiffly between them, and the three formed such a close unit, that if one of them had been knocked down [*zerschlagen hätte*], then all three of them would have been knocked down."¹⁸

Even the final scene, with K. lying on the stone in a posture "quite forced and implausible," is more an act of torture gone awry than an execution.¹⁹ And as the officer in the penal colony fails to find by means of torture the truth that he was looking for, so also the death of K. seems more like a homicide than like a conclusion of a *quaestio veritatis*. In the end, in fact, he lacks the strength to do what he knew was his duty: "to seize the knife as it passed from hand to hand above him and plunge it into himself."²⁰ Whoever has slandered himself can confess his own truth only by torturing himself. At any rate, torture, like an inquiry into truth, has missed its goal.

12. K. (every man) slanders himself in order to be subtracted from the law, from the accusation that it seems to incontestably direct toward him, and from which he is unable to escape (as the prison chaplain claims at one point, simply declaring oneself innocent is "how guilty people always talk").²¹ Nevertheless, by acting in this way, he ends up resembling the prisoner from one of Kafka's fragments, who "sees a gallows being erected in the prison yard, mistakenly believes that it is intended for him, breaks out of his cell in the night, and goes down to hang himself."²² Here lies the ambiguity of the law: rooted as it is in the self-slander of

individuals, it nevertheless presents itself as a power that is foreign and superior to them.

It is in this sense that one should read the parable on the door of the law that the priest recounts to K. in the scene in the cathedral. The door of the law is the accusation through which the individual comes to be implicated within the law. But the first and supreme accusation is pronounced by the accused himself (albeit in the form of self-slander). For this reason the strategy of the law consists in making the accused believe that the accusation (the door) is destined (perhaps) precisely for him, that the court demands (perhaps) something from him, that there is (perhaps) a trial in progress that has something to do with him. In reality there is no accusation and no trial, at least not until the moment in which whoever believes himself to be accused stops accusing himself.

This is the sense of the "deception" (*Täuschung*) that is, according to the words of the priest, put into question by the parable ("In the introductory texts to the law it says of this deception: Before the law stands a doorkeeper").²³ The problem is not so much, as K. believes, who deceives (the doorkeeper) and who is being deceived (the man from the country). The problem is also not whether the two statements of the doorkeeper (that "he can't grant him admittance now" and that "this entrance was meant solely for you") are more or less contradictory.²⁴ At all events, they mean, "You are not accused," and "The accusation concerns you alone; only you can accuse yourself and be accused." They are, therefore, an invitation to self-accusation, an invitation to allow oneself to be captured in the trial. For this reason K.'s hope—that the priest could give him "decisive advice" that would help him, not to influence the trial but rather to avoid it, to always live outside of it—cannot but be in vain. Even the priest is, in reality, a doorkeeper; even he "belongs to the court." The true deception is precisely the existence of doorkeepers, of humans (or angels: guarding the door is, in the Jewish tradition, one of the functions of angels)—from the lowliest bureaucrat all the way up to the attorneys and the highest ranking judge—whose aim is to induce other humans to

accuse themselves and have them pass through the door that leads to nowhere but the trial. The parable does, perhaps, contain a piece of "advice," though. What is here at stake is not the study of the law—which in itself bears no guilt—but rather the "long study of its doorkeeper" (*in dem jahrelangen Studium des Türhüters*) to which the man from the country dedicates himself uninterruptedly during his sojourn before the law.²⁵ It is thanks to this study, to this new Talmud, that the man from the country—in opposition to Josef K.—was able to live to the very end outside the trial.

Agrimensor

1. Inasmuch as he dealt with the constitution of borders or limits, the land surveyor was particularly important in Rome. To become a surveyor, an *agrimensor* (or, following the name of his instrument, a *gromaticus*), one had to pass a difficult exam; otherwise, practicing this profession could be punished with death. Rome's borders had, in fact, a sacred character to such a degree that whoever eliminated these borders (*terminum exarare*) became *sacer* and could be killed by anyone with impunity. There were also simpler reasons accounting for the importance of the land surveyor. In civil law, just as in public law, the possibility of ascertaining territorial boundaries, of locating and assigning portions of land (*ager*), and finally, of arbitrating border disputes influenced the very practice of law. For this reason, insofar as he was a *finitor* par excellence—he who ascertains, establishes, and determines boundaries—the land surveyor was also called *iuris auctor*, "creator of law," and he held the title *vir perfectissimus*.

It is not surprising, then, that the first collection of texts on land surveying precedes Justinian's *Corpus Iuris* by almost a century. It is even less surprising that immediately after its publication, the necessity was felt to prepare a new edition of the *Corpus gromaticum*, which interpolated the opinions of jurists between the writings of the land surveyors.

2. The instrument of the Roman land surveyor was the *groma*

(or *gruma*), a sort of cross whose center was positioned in correspondence with a point on the ground (called the *umbilicus soli*) and from whose ends hung four taut threads with small weights. Thanks to this instrument, the land surveyor could trace the straight lines (*rigores*) that permitted him to measure the terrain and trace its limits.

The two fundamental lines that crossed one another at a right angle were the *kardo*, traced from north to south, and the *decumanus*, which ran from east to west. These two lines corresponded, in the foundation of the *castrum* ("fortified place" or "castle"—*castrum* is the diminutive of *castrum*—but also "military camp"), to the two principal roads around which the dwellings (or the soldiers' tents, in the case of a military camp) were gathered.

For the Romans the original celestial character of this fundamental *constitutio limitum* was beyond all doubt. For this reason Hyginus's treatise on the *Constitution of Limits* begins with these words: "Among all the rites and acts that have to do with measurements, the most eminent is the constitution of limits. It has a celestial origin and a perpetual endurance . . . since limits are constituted in their reference to the world: indeed, the *decumani* are traced by following the course of the sun, and the *kardines* according to the axis of the poles."²⁶

3. In 1848, three eminent philologists and historians of law, F. Blume, K. Lachmann, and A. Rudorff, published in Berlin the first modern edition of the corpus of Roman land surveyors: *Die Schriften der römischen Feldmesser*. The edition (which gathers in two volumes the treatises of Julius Frontinus, Aggenus Urbicus, Hyginus Gromaticus, and Siculus Flaccus) contains an extensive appendix that reproduces the illustrations from the manuscripts. Particularly striking among them, and in twenty-nine variations, is the image of a *castrum*, which recalls in a truly astounding way the description of the castle that appears to K. in the first chapter of the novel: "It was neither an old knight's fortress nor a magnificent new edifice, but a large complex, made up of a few two-story buildings and many lower, tightly packed ones. Had one not

known that this was a castle, one could have taken it for a small town."²⁷ The castle's round tower with its small windows, which reminds K. of the church tower in his hometown, appears in the illustrations multiple times.

Other illustrations show the result of the first *constitutio limitum*: the fundamental division of space according to the *kardo* and the *decumanus*. In each one of them, at the northern extreme of the meridian, one clearly reads the letter *K*, the initial of *kardo*. At the opposite pole is the letter *M* (for *maximus*). In this way *KM* defines the first line, the fundamental limit, while *DM* (abbreviation of *decumanus maximus*) defines the second line, which is perpendicular to the first. The letter *K* carries the same meaning, either alone or in combination with others, in multiple occasions throughout the text.

4. Let us try to take seriously the protagonist's profession in *The Castle*. In the language of land surveyors, *K* means *kardo*, which is thus called "because it directs itself towards the cardinal point of the sky" (*quod directum ed kardinem caeli est*). What *K*. does—the profession that he provokingly claims to have, and which the functionaries of the castle consider a kind of defiance—is, therefore, the "constitution of limits." The conflict—if it is indeed a conflict, as it seems to be—does not have as much to do (according to Brod's reckless suggestion) with the possibility of settling in the village and being accepted by the castle as it does with the setting (or transgressing) of borders. If the castle (again according to Brod) is grace understood as the "divine government" of the world, then the land surveyor—who presents himself not with his instruments but rather with "a knobby stick within reach"²⁸—is engaged in an obstinate struggle with the castle and its bureaucrats over the limits of this government, in an implacable and very special *constitutio limitum*.

5. On January 16, 1922, during the composition of *The Castle*, Kafka writes down in his diary some considerations on the subject of limits, whose importance have been underlined many times,

(or *grunda*), a sort of cross whose center was positioned in correspondence with a point on the ground (called the *umbilicus castrorum*) and from whose ends hung four taut threads with small weights. Thanks to this instrument, the land surveyor could trace the straight lines (*rigores*) that permitted him to measure the terrain and trace its limits.

The two fundamental lines that crossed one another at a right angle were the *kardo*, traced from north to south, and the *decumanus*, which ran from east to west. These two lines corresponded to the foundation of the *castrum* ("fortified place" or "castle"—*castrum* is the diminutive of *castrum*—but also "military camp"), the two principal roads around which the dwellings (or the soldiers' tents, in the case of a military camp) were gathered.

For the Romans the original celestial character of this fundamental *constitutio limitum* was beyond all doubt. For this reason Hyginus's treatise on the *Constitution of Limits* begins with these words: "Among all the rites and acts that have to do with measurements, the most eminent is the constitution of limits. It has a celestial origin and a perpetual endurance . . . since limits are constituted in their reference to the world: indeed, the *decumanus* is traced by following the course of the sun, and the *kardines* according to the axis of the poles."²⁶

3. In 1848, three eminent philologists and historians of law—Blume, K. Lachmann, and A. Rudorff, published in Berlin the first modern edition of the corpus of Roman land surveyors: *Die Schriften der römischen Feldmesser*. The edition (which gathers in two volumes the treatises of Julius Frontinus, Aggenus Urbicus, Hyginus Gromaticus, and Siculus Flaccus) contains an extensive appendix that reproduces the illustrations from the manuscripts. Particularly striking among them, and in twenty-nine variations, is the image of a *castrum*, which recalls in a truly astounding way the description of the castle that appears to K. in the first chapter of the novel: "It was neither an old knight's fortress nor a magnificent new edifice, but a large complex, made up of a few two-story buildings and many lower, tightly packed ones. Had one not

known that this was a castle, one could have taken it for a small town. . . . The castle's round tower in his hometown, appears in the illustrations multiple times.

Other illustrations show the result of the first *constitutio limitum* and the fundamental division of space according to the *kardo* and the *decumanus*. In each one of them, at the northern extreme of the *decumanus*, one clearly reads the letter *K*, the initial of *kardo*. At the opposite pole is the letter *M* (for *maximus*). In this way *KM* defines the first line, the fundamental limit, while *DM* (abbreviation of *decumanus maximus*) defines the second line, which is perpendicular to the first. The letter *K* carries the same meaning, either alone or in combination with others, in multiple occasions throughout the text.

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though they have never been linked to the profession of the novel's protagonist. Kafka speaks of a breakdown (*Zusammenbruch*) he experienced in the preceding week, after which the interior world and the external one were divided and cut off from one another. The savage wildness (*Wildheit*) that was produced in the interiority is described as a "hunt" (*Jagen*), in which "self-observation does not leave any representation in peace but pursues them upward [*emporjagt*] in order to then be the one who is being pursued [*weitergejagt*] as representation by a new self-observation."²⁹ At this point the image of the hunt gives way to a reflection on the limit between humans and that which lies above and beyond them:

This hunt proceeds in a direction opposite to that of humanity [*nimmt die Richtung aus der Menschheit*]. Solitude, which for the most part has been always forced on me and in part sought by me (but wasn't this also a compulsion?), is now losing all its ambiguity and goes to the extreme [*geht auf das Äusserste*]. Where is it leading? Perhaps it leads, and this seems to me inescapable, to madness [*Irrsinn*, which is etymologically linked to *irren*, "wander," "err"]; there is nothing left to add, the hunt passes through me and tears me apart. Or else I can (can I?), even if only to a small degree, stay on my feet and allow myself to carry on the hunt. Where, then, do I arrive? "Hunt" is only an image; I could also say "an assault on the last earthly limit" [*Ansturm gegen die letzte irdische Grenze*]. This is an assault launched from below, by mankind, and since this is also only an image, I could replace it with the image of an assault aimed at me from above.

All this literature is an assault on the limit and, if Zionism had not intervened, it might easily have developed into a new secret doctrine, a Kabbalah [*zu einer neuen Geheimlehre, einer Kabbala*]. There are intimations of this. Though of course it requires an inconceivable genius to strike new roots in the old centuries, or to create the centuries anew, without, in so doing, consuming their forces, but rather, to only now begin consummating them.³⁰

6. The in every sense "decisive" character of this entry has not eluded scholars. In a single gesture it involves an existential decision ("going all the way to the extreme," no longer surrendering to the weakness that, as he will note on February 3, has kept him

"just as much from madness as from ascent"³¹—*Aufstieg*, again the idea of a movement upward) and a poetic theology (the new Kabbalah in opposition to Zionism, the ancient and complex Gnostic-messianic inheritance in opposition to the psychology and superficiality of the *westjüdische Zeit* in which he lived). But the diary entry becomes even more decisive if it refers to the novel that Kafka was writing at the time and to its protagonist, the land surveyor K. (*kardo*, "the one who directs himself toward the cardinal point of the sky"). The choice of profession (which K. assigns to himself, since no one hired him for the job and since, as the chairman informs him, the village has no need for this service) is, then, at once a declaration of war and a strategy. It is not the boundaries between the gardens and the houses of the village (which, in the words of the chairman, are already "marked out and duly registered")³² that he has come to occupy himself with. Rather, given that life in the village is, in reality, entirely determined by the boundaries that separate it from the castle and, at the same time, keep the former inseparable from the latter, it is these limits, above all, that the arrival of the land surveyor calls into question. The "assault on the last limit" is an assault against the boundaries that separate the castle (the high) from the village (the low).

7. Once again—and this is Kafka's grand strategic intuition, the new Kabbalah that he prepares—the struggle is not against God or the supreme sovereignty (Count Westwest is never really discussed in the novel) but against the angels, the messengers, and the bureaucrats who appear to be their representatives. A list of the castle's personnel with whom he has to deal is, in this sense, instructive: various "girls of the castle," a substeward, a messenger, a secretary, and a director (with whom K. never had direct contact, but whose name, Klamm, seems to evoke the extreme points—KM—of the *kardo*). At stake here—*pace* Kafka's theological interpreters, whether Jewish or Christian—is not a conflict with the divine but rather a relentless struggle with the lies of humans (or angels) concerning the divine (primarily those current in the environment of Western Jewish intellectuals to which he belonged).

These are the boundaries, separations, and barriers established between humans, as well as between humans and the divine, which the land surveyor wants to put into question.

The interpretation according to which K. wants to be accepted by the castle and settle in the village seems, then, all the more erroneous. K. does not know what to make of the village as it is, and even less so of the castle. What the land surveyor is concerned with is the border that divides and conjoins the two, and this is what he wants to abolish or, rather, render inoperative. Where this border actually passes, no one seems to know. Perhaps it does not really exist but passes, like an invisible door, within every human being.

Kardo is not only a term in land surveying; it also means the hinge of a door. "A hinge [*cardo*]," Isidore of Seville's etymology tells us, "is the place on which the door [*ostium*] swings and moves. It is so called after the Greek word for heart [*apo tes kardias*], because as the heart of man governs everything, so the hinge holds and moves the door. Whence the proverb: *in cardinem esse*, 'to find oneself at a turning point.'"³³ "The door [*ostium*]," Isidore continues (with a definition that Kafka could have subscribed to without any reservation), "is that which impedes one from entering."³⁴ The *ostiarii*, the doorkeepers, "are those who, in the Old Testament, impede the entrance of the impure into the Temple."³⁵ The hinge, the turning point, is where the door that obstructs access is neutralized. And if Bucephalus is the "new advocate," who studies the law only on the condition that it no longer be applied, then K. is the "new land surveyor," who renders inoperative the limits and the boundaries that separate (and at the same time hold together) the high and the low, the castle and the village, the temple and the home, the divine and the human. What would happen to the high and the low, the divine and the human, the pure and the impure, once the door (that is, the system of laws, written and unwritten, that regulate these relationships) is neutralized? What would happen, in the end, to that "world of truth" (to which the canine protagonist dedicates his investigations in the story that Kafka wrote when he definitively interrupted the composition of the novel)? This is just how much the land surveyor is allowed to catch a glimpse of.

§ 4 On the Uses and Disadvantages of Living among Specters

In the inaugural address at the University Institute of Architecture in Venice, delivered in February 1993, Manfredo Tafuri evoked the "cadaver" of Venice in no uncertain terms. Recalling the battle waged against those who proposed to host the World's Fair in the city, he concluded, not without a note of sadness: "The problem was not whether it was better to put makeup and lipstick on the cadaver, thus making it look so ridiculous that even children would have mocked it; nor was it what we—the powerless defenders, the disarmed prophets—ended up with, that is, a cadaver liquefying before our very eyes."¹

Almost two decades have passed since this implacable diagnosis, penned by a person with ample authority and competence, whose accuracy no one could possibly challenge in good faith (not even the mayors, architects, ministers, and the rest who, then as today, had and have, in Tafuri's words, the "indecency" to continue to doll up and undersell the cadaver). To the careful observer this actually means, however, that Venice is no longer a cadaver, that if it somehow still exists, it is only because it has managed to move beyond the state that follows death and the consequent decomposition of the corpse. This new state is that of the specter, of the dead who appears without warning, preferably in the middle of the night, creaking and sending signals, sometimes even speaking, though in a way that is not always intelligible. "Venice is whis-

pering," Tafuri writes, though he adds that such whispers are an unbearable sound to the modern ear.

Those who live in Venice attain a certain familiarity with this specter. It suddenly appears during a nocturnal stroll when, crossing a bridge, one's gaze turns a corner alongside a canal immersed in shadows, as a glimmer of orange light is switched on in a distant window, and an observing passerby on another bridge holds out a fogged-up mirror. Or when the Giudecca Island almost seems to gurgle as it drains rotten algae and plastic bottles onto the Zattere promenade. And it was yet again the same specter that—thanks to the invisible echo of a final ray of light, indefinitely lingering over the canals—Marcel saw enshrouded within the reflections of the palazzos in their ever-darkening obscurity. And prior still, this specter appears at the very origins of this city, which was not born, like almost every other city in Italy, as a result of the encounter between late antiquity in its decline and new barbarian forces but rather as a result of exhausted refugees who, abandoning their riches behind them in Rome, carried its phantasm in their minds, to then dissolve it into the city's waters, streaks, and colors.

What is a specter made of? Of signs, or more precisely of signatures, that is to say, those signs, ciphers, or monograms that are etched onto things by time. A specter always carries with it a date wherever it goes; it is, in other words, an intimately historical entity. This is why old cities are the quintessential place of signatures, which the flâneur in turn reads, somewhat absentmindedly, in the course of his drifting and strolling down the streets. This is why the tasteless restorations that sugarcoat and homogenize European cities also erase their signatures; they render them illegible. And this is why cities—and especially Venice—tend to look like dreams. In dreams the eyes of the dreaming person seize on each and every thing; each and every creature exhibits a signature that signifies more than its traits, gestures, and words could ever express. Nonetheless, those who stubbornly try to interpret their dreams are still at least partly convinced that they are meaningless.

Similarly, in the city, everything that has happened in some lane, in some piazza, in some street, on some sidewalk along a canal, in some back alley is suddenly condensed and crystallized into a figure that is at once labile and exigent, mute and winking, resentful and distant. Such figure is the specter or genius of the place.

What do we owe to the dead? "The work of love in recollecting the one who is dead," Kierkegaard writes, "is the work of the most disinterested, free, and faithful love."² But it is certainly not the easiest. The dead, after all, not only ask nothing from us, but they also seem to do everything possible in order to be forgotten. This, however, is precisely why the dead are perhaps the most demanding objects of love. We are defenseless and delinquent with respect to the dead; we flee from and neglect them.

Only in this way can one explain the Venetians' lack of love for their city. They do not know how to love it, nor are they capable of loving it, since loving the dead is difficult. It is much easier to pretend that it is alive, to cover its delicate and bloodless members with some makeup and rouge in order to exhibit it to the tourists who pay an admission price. In Venice the merchants are to be found not in the temple but in the tombs, where they offend not only the living but even more so the cadaver (or rather what they believe to be a cadaver, though without being able to confess it). But this cadaver is actually a specter, that is to say (if the merchants are aware of its existence), the most nebulous and subtle entity, and thus as distant from a cadaver as one can imagine.

Spectrality is a form of life, a posthumous or complementary life that begins only when everything is finished. Spectrality thus has, with respect to life, the incomparable grace and astuteness of that which is completed, the courtesy and precision of those who no longer have anything ahead of them. It is creatures of this kind that Henry James learned to perceive in Venice (in his ghost stories he compares them to sylphs and elves). These specters are so discrete and so elusive, that it is always the living who invade their homes and strain their reticence.

But there is also another type of spectrality that we may call larval, which is born from not accepting its own condition, from forgetting it so as to pretend at all costs that it still has bodily weight and flesh. Such larval specters do not live alone but rather obstinately look for people who generated them through their bad conscience. They live in them as nightmares, as incubi or succubi, internally moving their lifeless members with strings made of lies. While the first type of spectrality is perfect, since it no longer has anything to add to what it has said or done, the larval specters must pretend to have a future in order to clear a space for some torment from their own past, for their own incapacity to comprehend that they have, indeed, reached completion.

Ingeborg Bachmann once compared language to a city, with its ancient center, its more recent and peripheral boroughs, and finally the encircling beltway and its gas stations, which are also an integral part of the city. The same utopia and the same ruin are contained in our city and in our language, and we have dreamt and lost ourselves in both; indeed, they are merely the form that this dream and this loss take. If we compare Venice to a language, then living in Venice is like studying Latin, like trying to pronounce every word, syllable by syllable, in a dead language; learning how to lose and rediscover our way in the bottlenecks of declensions and unexpected openings of supines and future infinitives. It must be remembered, though, that one should never declare a language dead provided that it still somehow speaks and is read; it is only impossible—or nearly impossible—to assume the position of a subject in such a language, of the one who says “I.” The truth is that a dead language, just like Venice, is a spectral language that we cannot speak but that still quivers and hums and whispers in its own special way, so we can eventually come to understand and decipher it, albeit with some effort and the help of a dictionary. But to whom does a dead language speak? To whom does the specter of language turn? Not to us, certainly, but not even to its addressees from another time, of whom it no longer has any recollection. And yet, precisely for this reason, it is as if only

now, for the first time, that this language speaks, a language the philosopher refers to (though without realizing that he has thus bestowed it with a spectral consistency) by saying that *it* speaks—not we.

Venice is therefore the true emblem of modernity, even if in a completely different sense from the one evoked by Tafuri at the end of his inaugural address. Our time is not new [*nuovo*] but last [*novissimo*], that is to say, final and larval. This is what we usually understand as posthistory or postmodernity, without suspecting that this condition necessarily means being consigned to a posthumous and spectral life, without imagining that the life of the specter is the most liturgical and impervious condition, that it imposes the observance of uncompromising rules of conduct and ferocious litanies, with all their special prayers for dawn, dusk, night, and the rest of the canonical hours.

Hence the lack of rigor and decency of the larval specters who live among us. All peoples and all languages, all orders and all institutions, all parliaments and all sovereigns, the churches and the synagogues, the ermines and the gowns, have slipped one after another, inexorably, into a larval condition, though they are unprepared for and unconscious of it. And so writers write badly, since they need to pretend that their language is alive; parliaments legislate in vain because they need to simulate a political life for their larval nations; religions are deprived of piety because they no longer know how to bless the tombs and feel at home among them. This is the reason why we see skeletons and mannequins marching stiffly and mummies pretending to cheerfully conduct their own exhumation, without realizing that their decomposed members are leaving them in shambles and tatters, that their words have become glossolalic and unintelligible.

But the specter of Venice knows nothing of any of this. It no longer appears to the Venetians or, of course, to the tourists. Perhaps it appears to beggars who are chased away by brazen administrators, or to rats who anxiously cross from lane to lane with their

muzzles to the ground, or to those rare people who, like exiles, try to lucubrate on this often avoided lesson. Since what the specter argues, with its choirboy-like voice, is that if all the cities and all the languages of Europe now survive only as phantasms, then only those who have understood these most intimate and most familiar deeds, only those who recite and record the discarnate words and stones, will perhaps be able one day to reopen that breach in which history—in which life—suddenly fulfills its promise.

§ 5 On What We Can Not Do

Deleuze once defined the operation of power as a separation of humans from what they can do, that is, from their potentiality. Active forces are impeded from being put into practice either because they are deprived of the material conditions that make them possible or because a prohibition makes them formally impossible. In both cases power—and this is its most oppressive and brutal form—separates human beings from their potentiality and, in this way, renders them impotent. There is, nevertheless, another and more insidious operation of power that does not immediately affect what humans can do—their potentiality—but rather their “impotentiality,” that is, what they cannot do, or better, can not do.¹

That potentiality is always also constitutively an impotentiality, that every ability to do is also always already an ability to not do, is the decisive point of the theory of potentiality developed by Aristotle in the ninth book of the *Metaphysics*. “Impotentiality [*adynamia*],” he writes, “is a privation contrary to potentiality [*dynamis*]. Every potentiality is impotentiality of the same [potentiality] and with respect to the same [potentiality]” (1046a30–31). “Impotentiality” does not mean here only absence of potentiality, not being able to do, but also and above all “being able to not do,” being able to not exercise one’s own potentiality. And, indeed, it

is precisely this specific ambivalence of all potentiality—which is always the power to be and to not be, to do and to not do—that defines, in fact, human potentiality. This is to say that human beings are the living beings that, existing in the mode of potentiality, are capable just as much of one thing as its opposite, to do just as to not do. This exposes them, more than any other living being, to the risk of error; but, at the same time, it permits human beings to accumulate and freely master their own capacities, to transform them into “faculties.” It is not only the measure of what someone can do, but also and primarily the capacity of maintaining oneself in relation to one’s own possibility to not do, that defines the status of one’s action. While fire can only burn, and other living beings are only capable of their own specific potentialities—they are capable of only this or that behavior inscribed into their biological vocation—human beings are the animals capable of their own impotentiality.

It is on this other, more obscure, face of potentiality that today the power one ironically defines as “democratic” prefers to act. It separates humans not only and not so much from what they can do but primarily and for the most part from what they can not do. Separated from his impotentiality, deprived of the experience of what he can not do, today’s man believes himself capable of everything, and so he repeats his jovial “no problem,” and his irresponsible “I can do it,” precisely when he should instead realize that he has been consigned in unheard of measure to forces and processes over which he has lost all control. He has become blind not to his capacities but to his incapacities, not to what he can do but to what he cannot, or can not, do.

Hence the definitive confusion in our time between jobs and vocations, professional identities and social roles, each of which is impersonated by a walk-on actor whose arrogance is in inverse proportion to the instability and uncertainty of his or her performance. The idea that anyone can do or be anything—the suspicion that not only could the doctor who examines me today be a

video artist tomorrow, but that even the executioner who kills me is actually, as in Kafka’s *The Trial*, also a singer—is nothing but the reflection of the awareness that everyone is simply bending him- or herself according to this flexibility that is today the primary quality that the market demands from each person.

Nothing makes us more impoverished and less free than this estrangement from impotentiality. Those who are separated from what they can do, can, however, still resist; they can still not do. Those who are separated from their own impotentiality lose, on the other hand, first of all the capacity to resist. And just as it is only the burning awareness of what we cannot be that guarantees the truth of what we are, so it is only the lucid vision of what we cannot, or can not, do that gives consistency to our actions.

§ 6 Identity without the Person

The desire to be recognized by others is inseparable from being human. Indeed, such recognition is so essential that, according to Hegel, everyone is ready to put his or her own life in jeopardy in order to obtain it. This is not merely a question of satisfaction or self-love; rather, it is only through recognition by others that man can constitute himself as a person.

Persona originally means "mask," and it is through the mask that the individual acquires a role and a social identity. In Rome every individual was identified by a name that expressed his belonging to a *gens*, to a lineage; but this lineage was defined in turn by the ancestor's mask of wax that every patrician family kept in the atrium of its home. From here, it only takes a small step to transform *persona* into the "personality" that defines the place of the individual in the dramas and rituals of social life. Eventually, *persona* came to signify the juridical capacity and political dignity of the free man. The slave, inasmuch as he or she had neither ancestors, nor a mask, nor a name, likewise could not have a "persona," that is, a juridical capacity (*servus non habet personam*). The struggle for recognition is, therefore, the struggle for a mask, but this mask coincides with the "personality" that society recognizes in every individual (or with the "personage" that it makes of the individual with, at times, reticent connivance).

It is hardly surprising that one's recognition as a person was for millennia one's most jealously guarded and significant possession. Other human beings are important and necessary primarily because they can recognize me. Even the power, glory, and wealth that the "others" seem so sensitive to, make sense, in the final analysis, only in view of this recognition of personal identity. Of course, one can—as it is said that the Caliph of Baghdad, Hārūn al-Rashīd, was fond of doing—walk incognito through the streets dressed as a beggar. But if there were never a moment in which the name, glory, wealth, and power were recognized as "mine," if—as certain saints recommend doing—I were to live my whole life in nonrecognition, then my personal identity would also be lost forever.

In our culture, however, the "persona-mask" does not only have a juridical significance. It also made a decisive contribution to the formation of the moral person. This formation first took place in the theater but also in stoic philosophy, which modeled its ethics on the relationship between the actor and his mask. This relationship is defined by a double intensity: on the one hand, the actor can neither aspire to choose nor to refuse the part that the author has assigned to him. On the other hand, he cannot identify himself with the part without leaving some residue. "Remember," Epictetus writes,

that you are an actor in a part that the author of the play chose to give you: short if he wants it short, long if he wants it long. If he wants you to act the part of a beggar, see that you act the part skillfully. And do the same if it is a part of a cripple, or a public official, or a private citizen. It is not up to you to choose your part. But what does depend on you is to skillfully perform the persona that has been assigned to you.¹

Nevertheless, the actor (like the sage, who takes the actor as a paradigm) must not identify completely with his part, thus confusing himself with his stage persona: "The time is coming," Epictetus admonishes, "when actors will believe that their masks and costumes reflect their very selves."²

The moral person constitutes himself, then, through, at once, an adhesion to, and a distancing from, the social mask: he accepts it without reservation and, at the same time, almost imperceptibly distances himself from it.

Perhaps nowhere does this ambivalent gesture, along with the ethical gap that it opens up between man and his mask, appear with such evidence as in the Roman paintings and mosaics that represent the silent dialogue between the actor and his mask. The actor is depicted here either standing or sitting in front of his mask, which is held in his left hand or is placed on a pedestal. The actor's idealized posture and engrossed expression, as he fixes his gaze on the blind eyes of the mask, are a testimony to the special significance of their relationship. This relationship reaches its critical threshold—and, at the same time, the beginning of its decline—at the commencement of the modern age, with portraits of actors in the *commedia dell'arte*: Giovanni Gabrielli (known as *il Sivello*), Domenico Biancolelli (known as *Arlecchino*), and Tristano Martinelli (he also known as *Arlecchino*). Now the actor no longer looks at his mask, which is still displayed as he holds it in his hand. The distance between man and “persona,” so blurry in classical representations, is accentuated by the vivacity of the gaze that the actor decisively and inquisitively directs toward the spectator.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, techniques used by the police undergo an unexpected development, which involves a decisive transformation of the concept of identity. From this point identity no longer has, essentially, anything to do with recognition and the person's social prestige. Instead, it responds to the necessity of ensuring another type of recognition: that of the recidivist criminal by the police officer. It is not easy for us—habituated as we are to the knowledge that we are recorded with great precision in files and databases—to imagine just how arduous it could be to ascertain personal identity in a society that had neither photography nor documents of identification. As a matter of fact, in the second half of the nineteenth century this became the principal problem among those who saw themselves as the “defenders of

society” against the appearance, and increasing diffusion, of the figure that seems to constitute the obsession of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie: the “persistent offender.” Both France and England passed laws that clearly distinguished between the first-time criminal (whose punishment was prison) and the recidivist criminal (who was punished instead by being deported to the colonies). The necessity of being able to identify with certainty the person arrested for a crime became at this point a necessary condition for a functioning judiciary system.

It was this necessity that pushed Alphonse Bertillon, an obscure bureaucrat in the Paris police department, to establish toward the end of the 1870s a system of criminal identification based on anthropometric measurements and mug shots. In just a few years it would become known to the whole world as *Bertillonage*. Whoever happened to be detained or arrested for whatever reason would immediately be subjected to a series of measurements of the skull, arms, fingers, toes, ears, and face. Once the suspect had been photographed both in profile and frontally, the two photos would be attached to the “Bertillon card,” which contained all the useful identification data, according to the system that its inventor had christened *portrait parlé*.

Around the same time, Francis Galton (a cousin of Charles Darwin)—by developing the work of Henry Faulds (a bureaucrat in the English colonial administration)—began to work on a fingerprinting classification system, which would allow for the identification of recidivist criminals without possibility of error. Curiously, Galton was an avid supporter of Bertillon's anthropometric-photographic method and advocated its adoption in England. But he also maintained that the statistical survey of fingerprinting was particularly suited to natives from the colonies, whose physical characteristics tended to be confusing and appeared indistinguishable to a European eye. Another field to which this procedure was quickly applied was prostitution, because the use of anthropometric procedures on women involved what was considered an embarrassing promiscuity, and anyway, their long

hair rendered measurements more difficult to take. It was probably reasoning of this sort—linked in some fashion to racial or sexual prejudices—that delayed the application of Galton's method beyond the colonial realm or, in the case of the United States, beyond citizens of African or Asian descent. But by the first two decades of the twentieth century the system spread throughout the world and, beginning in the 1920s, tended to replace or to complement *Bertillonage*.

For the first time in the history of humanity, identity was no longer a function of the social "persona" and its recognition by others but rather a function of biological data, which could bear no relation to it. Human beings removed the mask that for centuries had been the basis of their recognizability in order to consign their identity to something that belongs to them in an intimate and exclusive way but with which they can in no way identify. No longer do the "others," my fellow men, my friends or enemies, guarantee my recognition. Not even my ethical capacity to not coincide with the social mask that I have nevertheless taken on can guarantee such recognition. What now defines my identity and recognizability are the senseless arabesques that my inked-up thumb leaves on a card in some police station. This is something with which I have absolutely nothing to do, something with which and by which I cannot in any way identify myself or take distance from: naked life, a purely biological datum.³

Anthropometric techniques that had been designed for criminals remained their exclusive privilege for some time. Even in 1943 the U.S. Congress rejected the Citizens Identification Act, which aimed at instituting mandatory identification cards with fingerprints for all citizens. Nevertheless, by the rule that stipulates that what was invented for criminals, foreigners, or Jews will sooner or later be invariably applied to all human beings as such, techniques that had been developed for recidivist criminals began to extend in the course of the twentieth century to all citizens. The mug shot, accompanied at times by fingerprints, became such an integral part of the identity card (a kind of con-

densed Bertillon card) that it gradually became obligatory in every state in the world.

But the extreme step has been taken only in our day and is still in the process of its full realization. Thanks to the development of biometric technologies that can rapidly obtain fingerprints and retinal or iris patterns by means of optical scanners, biometric apparatuses tend to move beyond the police stations and immigration offices to penetrate the sphere of everyday life. The entrance to the high school cafeteria, even in elementary schools in some countries (the industries of the biometric sector, which are undergoing a frenetic development, recommend that citizens get used to this sort of control from their early youth) is already regulated by an optical biometric apparatus, on which students distractedly place their hands. In France and other European countries a new biometric identity card (INES) is in the making, which has an electronic microchip containing basic elements of identification (fingerprints and digital photos), as well as a signature sample to facilitate commercial transactions. As part of the unstoppable drifting of political power toward governmentality—in which a liberal paradigm curiously converges with a statist paradigm—Western democracies are preparing to establish an archive containing the DNA of every citizen, as much to ensure security and repression of crime as to manage public health.

Our attention is called from various quarters to the dangers embedded in the absolute and limitless control of a power that has at its disposal the biometric and genetic information of all its citizens. With such power at hand, the extermination of the Jews (and every other imaginable genocide)—which was undertaken on the basis of incomparably less efficient documentation—would have been total and incredibly swift.

Even more serious, inasmuch as it has been completely unobserved, are the consequences that the processes of biometric and biological identification have on the constitution of the subject. What kind of identity can one construct on the basis of data that is merely biological? Certainly not a personal identity, which used

to be linked to the recognition by other members of the social group and, at the same time, to the capacity of the individual to take on the social mask without, however, being reduced to it. If, in the final analysis, my identity is now determined by biological facts—that in no way depend on my will, and over which I have no control—then the construction of something like a personal ethics becomes problematic. What relationship can I establish with my fingerprints or with my genetic code? How can I take on, and also take distance from, such facts? The new identity is an identity without the person, as it were, in which the space of ethics as we used to think of it loses its sense and must be thought through again from the ground up. Until this happens it makes sense to expect a general collapse of the personal ethical principles that have governed Western ethics for centuries.

The reduction of man to a naked life is today such a *fait accompli* that it is by now the basis of the identity that the state recognizes in its citizens. As the deportees to Auschwitz no longer had either a name or a nationality, and were by then only the numbers that had been tattooed on their arms, so the contemporary citizens, lost in an anonymous mass and reduced to the level of potential criminals, are defined by nothing other than their biometric data and, ultimately—by means of a sort of ancient fate, which has become all the more opaque and incomprehensible—their DNA. Nevertheless, if man is he who can indefinitely survive the human, if there is still some humanity that always exists beyond the inhuman, then ethics must be possible even in the extreme posthistorical threshold in which Western humanity seems to be stranded with a feeling of both joy and horror. Like every apparatus, biometric identification captures a more or less unconfessed desire for happiness. In this case we are dealing with the will to be freed from the weight of the person, from the moral as much as the juridical responsibility that it carries along with it. The person (in both tragic and comic guises) is also the bearer of guilt, so the ethics implied is necessarily ascetic, since it is founded on a separation (of the individual from the mask, of the ethical person

from the juridical person). It is against this separation that the new identity without the person asserts the illusion not of a unity, but of an infinite multiplication of masks. At the moment when individuals are nailed down to a purely biological and asocial identity, they are also promised the ability to assume all the masks and all the second and third lives possible on the Internet, none of which can ever really belong to them. To this one can add the fleeting and almost insolent pleasure of being recognized by a machine, without the burden of the emotional implications that are inseparable from recognition by another human being. The more the citizens of the metropolis have lost intimacy with one another, the more they have become incapable of looking each other in the eye, the more consoling the virtual intimacy with the apparatus becomes (an apparatus that has learned in turn to look so deeply into their retinas). The more they have lost all identity and all real belonging, the more gratifying it has become for them to be recognized by the Great Machine in its infinite and minute variants: from the turnstile of a subway entrance to an ATM machine, from the video camera that benevolently observes them while they enter the bank or walk down the street to the apparatus that opens the garage door for them, all the way to the future obligatory identity card that will recognize them in any time and any place for what they inexorably are. I am here if the Machine recognizes me or, at least, sees me; I am alive if the Machine, which knows neither sleep nor wakefulness, but is eternally alert, guarantees that I am alive; I am not forgotten if the Great Memory has recorded my numerical or digital data.

That this pleasure and these certainties are artificial and illusory is evident, and the first ones to recognize this are precisely those who experience them on a daily basis. What does it mean, in fact, to be recognized, if the object of recognition is not a person but a numerical datum? And behind the apparatus that seems to recognize me, are there not perhaps other men, who do not really want to recognize me but only to control and accuse me? And how is it possible to communicate with neither a smile nor a gesture, with

neither graciousness nor reticence, but rather through a biological identity?

And yet, following the rule that stipulates that history never returns to a lost state, we must be prepared, with neither regret nor hope, to search—beyond both personal identity and identity without the person—for that new figure of the human. Or, perhaps, what we must search for is simply the figure of the living being, for that face beyond the mask just as much as it is beyond the biometric *facies*. We still do not manage to see this figure, but the presentiment of it suddenly startles us in our bewilderment as in our dreams, in our unconsciousness as in our lucidity.

§ 7 Nudity

1. On April 8, 2005, a performance by Vanessa Beecroft took place in Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie. A hundred nude women (though, in truth, they were wearing transparent pantyhose) stood, immobile and indifferent, exposed to the gaze of visitors who, after having waited on a long line, entered in groups into a vast space on the museum's ground floor. The visitors, at once timid and curious, began to cast sidelong glances at bodies that were, after all, there to be looked at. After walking around them, as if they were conducting reconnaissance, the visitors began to distance themselves embarrassedly from the almost military ranks of the hostile, naked bodies. The first impression of those who attempted to observe not only the women but also the visitors was that this was a nonplace. *Something that could have and, perhaps, should have happened did not take place.*

Clothed men who observe nude bodies: this scene irresistibly evokes the sadomasochistic ritual of power. In the beginning of Pasolini's *Salò* (which more or less faithfully reproduces de Sade's *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*), four party-officials are about to lock themselves in their villa. While they remain fully clothed, the officials proceed to attentively inspect victims whom they compel to enter naked, so as to evaluate their merits and defects. Clothed, too, were the American soldiers standing in front of a pile of their tortured prisoners' naked bodies in the Abu Ghraib



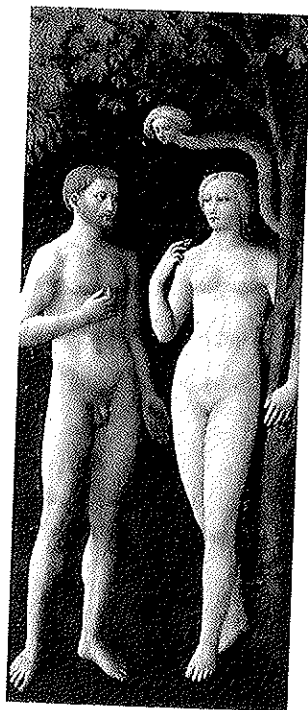
prison. But nothing of the like happened in the Neue Nationalgalerie: in a certain sense the relationship here seemed to be inverted, since there was nothing more perfidious than the bored and impertinent gaze that especially the youngest girls seemed to be continuously casting toward the defenseless spectators. No: what was supposed to happen and did not happen could not have been, under any circumstance, a sadomasochistic *séance*, a prodrome of an even more improbable orgy.

It seemed as if everyone was expectant, as if they were in a painting of the Last Judgment. But, on closer observation, even here the roles were reversed: the girls in pantyhose were the implacable and severe angels that the iconographic tradition always represents as being covered by long dresses. The visitors, on the other hand—hesitant and bundled-up as they were at the end of that Berlin winter—personified the resurrected awaiting their judgment, whose depiction in full nudity even the most sanctimonious theological tradition has authorized.

What did not take place was, therefore, neither torture nor a

partouze: it was, rather, simple nudity. Precisely in this ample and well-illuminated space—where a hundred female bodies of various ages, races, and shapes were on display, which the gaze could examine with ease and in detail—there seemed to be no trace of nudity. The event that was not produced (or, assuming that this was the intention of the artist, the event that took place by *not* happening) called the very nudity of the human body unequivocally into question.

2. Nudity, in our culture, is inseparable from a theological signature. Everyone is familiar with the story of Genesis, according to which after their sin Adam and Eve realized for the very first time that they were naked: “And the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (Gen. 3:7). According to theologians this does not happen as a result of sin having erased their simple, previous unawareness. Though they were not covered by any human clothing before the Fall, Adam and Eve were not naked; rather, they were covered by clothing of grace, which clung to them as a garment of glory (the Jewish version of this exegesis, which can be found for example in the Zohar, speaks about “clothing of light”). It is this supernatural clothing that was stripped from the two after their sin. Denuded, they are first forced to cover themselves with a loincloth of fig leaves that they fashioned themselves (“they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves waistbands” [Gen. 3:7]). Later on, at the moment of their expulsion from Paradise, they put on clothes made from animal skins, which had been prepared for them by God. All this means that our progenitors were nude in earthly Paradise only at two points: the first, in the presumably very brief interval between perceiving their nudity and making their loincloths; the second, the moment when they take off their fig leaves and put on their new garments of skins. And even during these two fleeting instances, nudity exists only negatively, so to speak: as a privation of the clothing of grace and as a presaging of the resplendent garment of glory that the blessed will receive in heaven. Full nudity exists, perhaps, only in the bodies of the damned in hell, as they unremittingly suffer



the eternal torment of divine justice. In this sense it can be said that in Christianity there is no theology of nudity, only a theology of clothing.

3. This is the reason why Erik Peterson, one of the rare modern theologians who has reflected on the question of nudity, entitled his article *Theologie des Kleides* (Theology of Clothing). The essential themes of the theological tradition are summed up in a few dense pages. First of all, there is the immediate connection between nudity and sin:

Nudity appears only after sin. Before the Fall there was an absence of clothing [*Unbekleidetheit*], but this was not yet nudity [*Nacktheit*]. Nudity presupposes the absence of clothing, but it does not coincide with it. The perception of nudity is linked to the spiritual act that the

Scriptures define as the "opening of the eyes." Nudity is something that one notices, whereas the absence of clothes is something that remains unobserved. Nudity could therefore have been observed after sin only if man's being had changed. This change, brought on by the Fall, must have entirely affected Adam and Eve's nature. There must have been, in other words, a metaphysical transformation, affecting man's mode of being, rather than merely a moral change.¹

This "metaphysical transformation" consists, however, simply in denudation, in the loss of the clothing of grace:

The distortion of human nature through sin leads to the "discovery" of the body, to the perception of its nudity. Before the Fall, man existed for God in such a way that his body, even in the absence of clothing, was not "naked." The human body's state of "not being naked," despite its apparent lack of clothing, is explained by the fact that supernatural grace enveloped the human person like a garment. Man did not simply find himself in the midst of the light of divine glory: he was clothed in the glory of God. Through sin, man loses the glory of God, and so in his nature a body without glory now becomes visible: the nakedness of pure corporeality, the denudation resulting in pure functionality, a body that lacks all nobility since its ultimate dignity lay in the divine glory now lost.²

Peterson tries to articulate in precise terms this essential connection between the Fall, nudity, and the loss of clothing, which seems to make sin consist in a simple act of undressing and baring (*Entblössung*): "The 'denudation' of the bodies of the first humans must have preceded the awareness of their bodies' nudity. This 'discovery' of the human body, which allows its 'naked corporeality' to appear, this ruthless denudation of the body with all the signs of its sexuality, which become visible for the eyes that have now been 'opened' by sin, can only be understood if we presuppose that what was 'covered' before the Fall is now what is 'discovered,' that what was before veiled and dressed is now unveiled and undressed."³

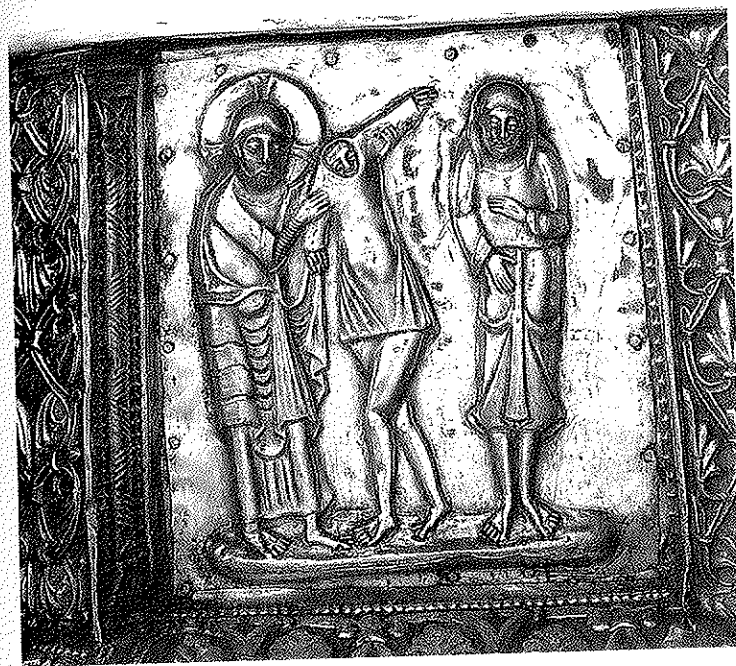
4. At this point the meaning of the theological apparatus begins

to take shape, by situating the very possibility of sin in the relationship that it establishes between nudity and clothing. Peterson's text appears, at least at first sight, to entail some contradictions. The "metaphysical transformation" that results from sin is, in reality, only the loss of the clothing of grace that hid the "naked corporeality" of the first couple. Logically, this means that sin (or at least the possibility of sin) already existed in this "naked corporeality," which in itself is deprived of grace. It means that the loss of clothing now makes this "naked corporeality" appear in its biological "pure functionality," "with all the signs of its sexuality," as a "body that lacks any nobility." If already before sin there was a need to cover up the human body with the veil of glory, then the blissful and innocent paradisiacal nudity was preceded by another nudity, a "naked corporeality" that sin, by removing the clothes of grace, allows, mercilessly, to appear.

The truth of the matter is that the seemingly secondary problem concerning the relationship between nudity and clothing coincides with another problem that theologically is utterly fundamental: the link between nature and grace. "Just as clothing presupposes the body that must be covered," Peterson writes, "so grace presupposes nature, which must reach its fulfillment in glory. This is why supernatural grace is granted to man in Paradise as clothing. *Man was created without clothes*—which means that he had a nature of his own, distinct from divine nature—but *he was created with this absence of clothing in order to then be dressed in the supernatural garment of glory.*"⁴

The problem of nudity is, therefore, the problem of human nature in its relationship with grace.

5. Preserved in the Collegiate Church of San Isidoro in León is an eleventh-century silver reliquary, on whose sides scenes from the book of Genesis are sculpted in relief. One of the panels shows Adam and Eve shortly before their expulsion from Eden. According to the biblical narrative, they have just realized that they are naked and have covered their shame with fig leaves, held by their left hands. Before them stands their vexed creator, wrapped in a sort of toga, and making an inquisitive gesture to-

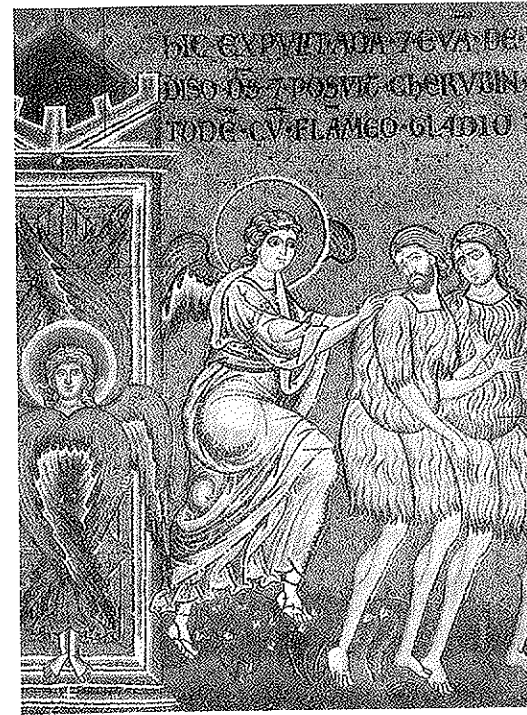


ward them with his right hand (which is clarified by the caption, "*Dixit Dominus Adam ubi es*" [God said to Adam, Where art thou?] [Gen. 3:9]). This gesture is mirrored by the right hands of the culprits, as they childishly attempt to make excuses for themselves: Adam points at Eve, and Eve points at the serpent. The next scene, which particularly interests us, illustrates the verse from Genesis 3:21: "*Et fecit Dominus Deus Adae et mulieri eius tunicas pelliceas et, induit eos*" (And God made for Adam and for his wife tunics of skins, and clothed them). The unknown artist represents Adam already dressed, with a posture revealing great sadness; but, with delightful inventiveness, he depicts Eve with her legs still naked, while the Lord appears to be putting the tunic on her by force. The woman, whose face we can just barely see above the neckline of the dress, resists this divine violence with all her might: this can be proved beyond all doubt not only by the unnatural torsion of her legs and the grimace of her

squinting eyes but also by the gesture of her right hand, which desperately grasps at God's garment.

Why does Eve not want to wear her "fur coat"? Why does she want to remain naked (it appears that she has either taken the fig leaf off or that, in the vehemence of the scuffle, she has lost it)? Of course, an ancient tradition, which can be traced back to Saint Nilus, Theodoret of Cyrus, and Jerome, conceives of garments made from animal skins—the Septuagint's *chitonai dermatinoi*—as a symbol of death (indeed, *pelliccia*, the Italian word for fur coat, which maintains a sinful connotation up to this day, derives from *tunicæ pelliceæ*, the Vulgate's rendering of the same phrase). This is the reason why, after baptism, those tunics of skins are replaced by a garment made of white linen ("When, ready for the clothes of Christ, we have taken off our tunics of skins," Jerome writes, "we will then put on linen clothing, which has nothing to do with death, but is wholly white, so that, after having been baptized, we can gird our loins in truth").⁵ Other authors, like John Chrysostom and Augustine, insist instead on the literal meaning of the episode. And it is probable that neither the maker of the reliquary nor its buyers intended to give a particular significance to Eve's gesture. Yet this episode acquires its proper sense only if we remember that this is the last moment of the couple's life in earthly Paradise, the last moment when our progenitors could still be naked, before being clothed in animal skins and expelled from Paradise forever. If this is indeed the case, then the slim, silvery figure that desperately resists being clothed is an extraordinary symbol of femininity. This woman is the tenacious custodian of paradisiacal nudity.

6. That grace is something like a garment (Augustine calls it *indumentum gratiae*)⁶ means that, like all garments, it was an addition that can also be taken away. But for this very reason it also means that the addition of grace constituted human corporeality, originally, as "naked" and that its removal always returns anew to the exhibition of nudity as such. And since grace, in the words of the apostle, "was given to us in Christ before the beginning of



time," since it was, as Augustine never tires of repeating, "given when those to whom it was to be given were not yet in existence," human nature is always already constituted as naked; it is always already "naked corporeality."⁷

Peterson stresses the idea that grace is a garment while nature is a kind of nudity. Citing the proverb, "Clothes make the man" (or in its German version, "clothes make people" [*Kleider machen Leute*]), he explains that

not only people, but man as such is made by his clothes, since he is uninterpretable without them. Human nature, according to its very goal, is subordinate to grace, and is fully realized only through grace. Hence Adam is "clothed" with supernatural justice, innocence, and immortality, for only such clothing could bestow on him his dignity and thus make visible what God destined him for through the gift of

grace and glory. But this is not the only thing that the paradisiacal clothing helps us to comprehend. It also shows us that—precisely as is the case with clothes—justice, innocence, and immortality must be granted to Adam in order to make him complete. Finally, we also reach this ultimate truth: that just as clothes veil the body, so in Adam supernatural grace covers a nature abandoned by God's glory and left to itself. This is presented as the possibility of human nature degenerating into what the Scriptures call "flesh," the becoming visible of man's nudity in its corruption and putrefaction. There is therefore a profound significance to the fact that the Catholic tradition calls "clothing" the gift of grace that man receives in Paradise. Man can begin to be interpreted only through such clothing of glory that, from a certain point of view, belongs to him only exteriorly, just like any piece of clothing. Something very important is expressed in this exteriority of mere clothing: that grace presupposes created nature, its "absence of clothing," as well as the possibility of it being denuded.⁸

Genesis does not explicitly say anywhere that human nature was imperfect, "uninterpretable," or potentially corrupted and in need of grace. By asserting the necessity of grace, which, like clothing, must cover the nudity of the body, Catholic theology makes it a sort of ineluctable supplement that, precisely for this reason, presupposes human nature as its obscure bearer: "naked corporeality." But this original nudity immediately disappears underneath the clothing of grace, to then reappear as *natura lapsa* only at the moment of sin, that is, at the moment of denudation. Just as the political mythologeme of *homo sacer* postulates as a presupposition a naked life that is impure, sacred, and thus killable (though this naked life was produced only by means of such presupposition), so the naked corporeality of human nature is only the opaque presupposition of the original and luminous supplement that is the clothing of grace. Though the presupposition is hidden behind the supplement, it comes back to light whenever the caesura of sin once again divides nature and grace, nudity and clothing.

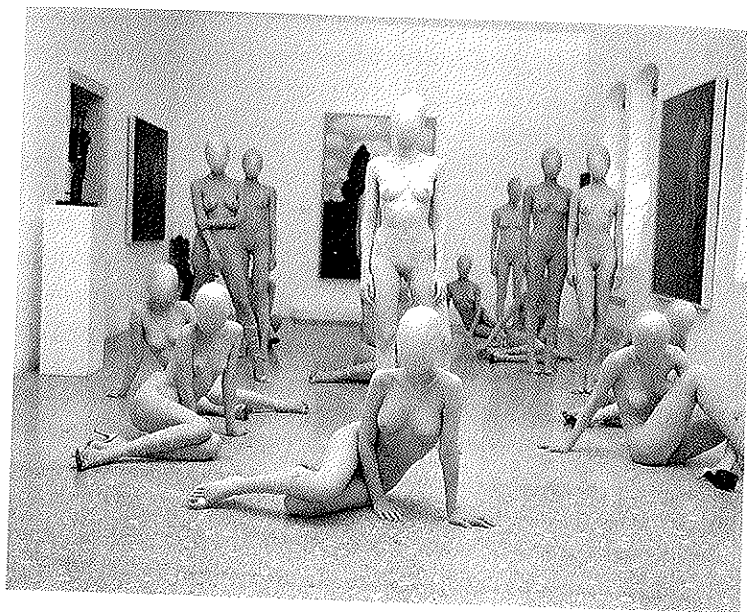
This means that sin did not introduce evil into the world but merely revealed it. Sin essentially consists, at least as far as its effects are concerned, in the removing of clothing. Nudity, "naked corpo-

reality," is the irreducible Gnostic residue that implies a constitutive imperfection in creation, which must, at all events, be covered up. Nevertheless, the corruption of nature, which has now come to light, did not exist before sin but was itself produced by it.

7. If nudity is marked in our culture by such a weighty theological legacy, if it is only the obscure and ungraspable presupposition of clothing, then one comprehends why it could not have helped but miss its appointment in Vanessa Beecroft's performance. To eyes so profoundly (albeit unknowingly) conditioned by the theological tradition, that which appears when clothes (grace) are taken off is nothing but their shadow. To completely liberate nudity from the patterns of thought that permit us to conceive of it solely in a privative and instantaneous manner is a task that requires uncommon lucidity.

In our culture one of the consequences of this theological nexus that closely unites nature and grace, nudity and clothing, is that nudity is not actually a state but rather an event. Inasmuch as it is the obscure presupposition of the addition of a piece of clothing or the sudden result of its removal—an unexpected gift or an unexpected loss—nudity belongs to time and history, not to being and form. We can therefore only experience nudity as a denudation and a baring, never as a form and a stable possession. At any rate, it is difficult to grasp and impossible to hold on to.

It is not surprising, then, that in the performance at the Neue Nationalgalerie, just as in all the preceding ones, the women were never completely naked but always bore some trace of clothing (shoes during the performance at the Gagosian Gallery in London, shoes and a sort of gauze mask at the Guggenheim Collection in Venice, a black *cache-sexe* at the Palazzo Ducale in Genoa). Strip-tease, that is to say, the impossibility of nakedness, is in this sense the paradigm for our relationship with nudity. As an event that never reaches its completed form, as a form that does not allow itself to be entirely seized as it occurs, nudity is, literally, infinite: it never stops occurring. Inasmuch as its nature is essentially defective, inasmuch as it is nothing other than the event of the lack of



grace, nudity can never satiate the gaze to which it is offered. The gaze avidly continues to search for nudity, even when the smallest piece of clothing has been removed, even when all the parts that were hidden have been exhibited in a barefaced manner.

If, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there spread from Germany to the rest of Europe movements preaching nudism as a new social ideal that could be reconciled with our human nature, it is no surprise that this was possible only by opposing the obscene nudity of pornography and prostitution with nudity as *Lichtkleid* (clothes of light), thereby unknowingly evoking the ancient theological conception of innocent nudity as clothing of grace. What those naturists displayed was therefore not nudity but rather clothing—not nature but rather grace.

An investigation that wishes to seriously confront the problem of nudity must first and foremost go back archaeologically to the source of the theological opposition between nudity and clothing, nature and grace. The aim here is not to tap into an original state prior to the separation but to comprehend and neutralize the apparatus that produced this separation.

8. Augustine's *The City of God* is, in every sense, a decisive moment for the construction of the theological apparatus of nature (nudity) / grace (clothing). Augustine had already developed the conceptual foundations for his view on the subject in the polemics against Pelagius that can be found in *On Nature and Grace*. According to Pelagius—one of the most integral figures among those whom the dogmatic orthodoxy ended up pushing to the margins of the Christian tradition—grace is nothing other than human nature just as God created it, with free will (*nullam dicit dei gratiam nisi naturam nostram cum libero arbitrio*).⁹ As a result the possibility of not sinning inheres in human nature in an inseparable way (Augustine uses in his critique of Pelagius the word *inamissibile*, that which cannot be lost) and without the need for further grace. Pelagius does not deny the existence of grace but identifies it with Edenic nature, which he in turn identifies with the sphere of possibility or potentiality (*posse*) that precedes both will (*velle*) and action (*actio*). Adam's sin—which is a sin of the will—does not necessarily signify, therefore, the loss of grace, which is in turn passed on as a curse to the entire human race (*per universam massam*," as Augustine writes). On the contrary, though it is a given that humans have sinned and continue to sin, it nevertheless remains true that, at least *de sola possibilitate*, every man—just like Adam in Paradise—is capable of not sinning.

It is this identification of nature with grace that Augustine rejects so tenaciously in his anti-Pelagian writings, affirming instead their irreducible difference. At stake in the difference between the two is nothing less than the discovery of the doctrine of Original Sin, which would be officially taken up by the Church only two centuries later, at the Second Council of Orange. It is enough for now to observe that the interpretation of the Edenic condition and Adam's Fall in *The City of God* is based on this opposition between nature and grace. Adam and Eve were created with animal rather than spiritual bodies, but their bodies were clothed with grace as if it had been a garment. Consequently, just as they knew neither illness nor death, likewise, they did not know the *libido*, that is, the uncontrollable excitation of their private parts (*obscenae*). *Libido*

is the technical term in Augustine that defines the consequence of sin. On the basis of a passage from Paul ("*Caro enim concupiscit adversus*" [Gal. 5:17]), *libido* is defined as a rebellion of the flesh and its desires against the spirit, as an irremediable split between flesh (*caro*—*sarx*—is the term by which Paul expresses the subjection of man to sin) and will. Augustine writes that before sin,

as the Scriptures say, "man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed." This was not because they did not see their nudity; rather, their nudity was not yet indecent, because the *libido* did not yet arouse their members against their will. . . . Their eyes were open, but not in order to recognize what was granted to them under the clothing of grace, since their members did not yet know how to rebel against their will. When this grace was stripped from them, in order to punish their disobedience with a commensurate punishment, a new impudence was awakened in the urges of their bodies. The consequence was that their nudity became indecent, thus making them aware of their condition and dismayed by it.¹⁰

The parts of the body that could once be freely exposed in their glory (*glorianda*) thus become something that had to be hidden (*pudenda*). Hence the shame that drives Adam and Eve to cover themselves with fig leaves, and which becomes from that day on such an inseparable element of the human condition that, Augustine writes, "even in the dark solitudes of India, even those who are accustomed to philosophize in the nude (and are therefore called gymnosophists), cover their genitals in order to differentiate them from the other parts of their body."¹¹

9. At this point Augustine presents his surprising conception of Edenic sexuality, or at least what this sexuality would have been had humans not sinned. If the postlapsarian *libido* is defined by the impossibility of controlling the genitals, then the state of grace that preceded sin consists in the will's perfect control over the sexual organs:

In Paradise, if culpable disobedience had not been punished with another disobedience, marriage would not have known this resistance,

this opposition, this struggle between *libido* and will. On the contrary, our private parts, like all the other parts of the body, would have been at the service of the will. That which was created for this end would have sown the field of generation, as the hand sows the earth. . . . Man would have sown his seed and woman would have received it in her genitals, only when necessary, and to the degree necessary, as a result of the will's command, and not due to the excitation of the *libido*.¹²

To substantiate his hypothesis, Augustine does not hesitate to turn to a somewhat grotesque example of the will's control over those bodily parts that seem to be uncontrollable:

We know of men who set themselves apart from others, by their amazing ability to achieve with their body things other men are absolutely incapable of. There are those who can move their ears, one at a time or both together. Others are able to move their hairline, shifting their scalp back and forth at will. Still others can vomit on command everything that they have devoured by slightly pressing on their belly, as if it were a bag. Some can imitate the cries of birds and beasts, as well as the voices of other men, so perfectly that no difference can be detected. And finally, there are those who can voluntarily emit from their anus a variety of sounds without any unpleasant odor, to the effect that they appear to be singing from that region.¹³

It is on the basis of this not very edifying model that we must imagine Edenic sexuality under the clothes of grace. With a signal of the will, the genitals would have been aroused, just as easily as we might raise a hand, and the husband would impregnate his wife without the burning stimulation of the *libido*: "It would have been possible for man to transmit his seed to his wife without harming her physical integrity, just as now the flow of the menstrual blood can come forth from the womb of a virgin without compromising her integrity."¹⁴

This chimera ("At present," Augustine writes, "there is nothing that would enable us to demonstrate how this is possible") of a nature perfectly submissive to grace renders the corporeality of mankind after the Fall even more obscene. The uncontrollable

nudity of the genitals is the cipher of nature's corruption after sin, which humanity transmits through procreation.

10. It is worth emphasizing the paradoxical conception of human nature that lies at the foundation of the above claims. This conception is in agreement with the doctrine of Original Sin (even though the technical term *peccatum originale* is still missing) that Augustine espouses, contrary to Pelagius. Confirmed by the Council of Orange in 529, it would achieve its full elaboration only in Scholasticism. According to this doctrine human nature was corrupted by Adam's sin (through which "all have sinned," Rom. 5:12), and without the aid of grace human beings became absolutely incapable of doing good. But if we now ask ourselves what the nature that became corrupted is, the answer is not so simple. Adam was in fact created in grace, and therefore his nature, like his nudity, was cloaked with divine gifts right from the start. Because man abandoned God, after sin he was abandoned to himself and left entirely to the mercy of his nature. Nevertheless, the loss of grace does not simply allow a previous and, for that matter, unknown nature to appear. Instead, what appears is only a corrupted nature (*in deterius commutata*) that results from this loss of grace. With the removal of grace an original nature comes to light that is no longer original, because only sin is original, and so this nature has become merely a derivation of this sin.

It is not a coincidence that in his commentary on Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Cajetan (a perceptive theologian who opposed Martin Luther in 1518 at the behest of the Catholic Church) found it necessary to make use of a comparison with nudity in order to illustrate this paradox. The difference, he says, between a supposedly "pure" human nature (that was not created in grace) and an originally graceful nature that was then lost is the same as the difference between a nude person and a person who has been denuded (*expoliata*). This analogy is illuminating not only in regard to nature but also in regard to nudity, and it also clarifies the sense of the theological strategy that stubbornly links clothing with grace, nature with nudity. Just as the nudity

of a person who is simply nude is identical to—and nevertheless different from—the nudity of a person who has been denuded, so human nature, which has lost what was not nature (grace), is different from what it was before grace had been added to it. Nature is now defined by the non-nature (grace) that it has lost, just as nudity is defined by the non-nudity (clothing) that has been stripped from it. Nature and grace, nudity and clothing, constitute a singular aggregate whose elements are separate and autonomous, though—at least with regard to nature—they do not remain unchanged after their separation. But this means that nudity and nature are—as such—impossible: there is, instead, only baring, only corrupted nature.

11. The Bible nowhere states that Adam and Eve were unable to see their nudity before they had sinned because it was covered by the clothes of grace. The only thing certain is that in the beginning Adam and Eve were naked and felt no shame ("And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" [Gen. 2:25]). After the Fall, by contrast, they felt the need to cover themselves with fig leaves. The transgression of the divine command entails, then, a passage from nudity without shame to nudity that must be concealed.

The nostalgia for nudity without shame, the idea that what was lost through sin is the possibility of being nude without blushing, forcefully resurfaces in the Gospels as well as in extracanonical texts (which we unreasonably continue to call "apocryphal," that is, "hidden"). In *The Gospel According to Thomas* we read: "His disciples asked: 'When will you reveal yourself to us, and when will we see you?' Jesus answered: 'When you undress without shame, when you take off your clothes and trample on them with your feet like children; then you will behold the Son of the living God, and you will have no fear.'"¹⁵

In the tradition of the Christian community of the first two centuries, the only occasion in which one could be nude without shame was the baptismal ritual, which was not usually performed on newborn babies but mainly on adults (the baptism of infants

became obligatory only after the doctrine of Original Sin was accepted by the entire Church). It entailed the immersion in water of the naked catechumen in the presence of members of the community (it is to this ritualistic nudity of the baptized that we owe the relative and otherwise unexplainable tolerance in our culture toward beach nudity). The *Catechetical Lectures* by Cyril of Jerusalem comments on this rite in the following way: "As soon as you enter, immediately take off your clothes, in order to signify the removing of the old man and his sins. . . . How Marvelous! They are nude in front of everyone's eyes, and they do not feel ashamed, since they are the image of Adam, the first-formed man, who was naked in Paradise and was not ashamed."¹⁶

The clothes, which the baptized trample on with their feet, are "the clothes of shame," heirs of the "tunics of skins" that our progenitors wore at the moment they were expelled from Paradise. These are the clothes that get replaced after baptism by the garment made of white linen. But what is decisive in the ritual of baptism is precisely its evocation of Adamic nudity without shame as a symbol and pledge of redemption. And it is for this nudity that, on the reliquary in San Isidoro, Eve feels nostalgia, as she refuses to put on the clothes that God is forcing her to wear.

12. "Like children": that infantile nudity is the paradigm of nudity without shame is a very ancient motif, not only in Gnostic texts like *The Gospel According to Thomas* but also in Jewish and Christian documents. Even though the doctrine according to which Original Sin is propagated through procreation implies the rejection of infantile innocence (hence—as we have seen—the practice of baptizing newborns), the fact that children are not ashamed by their nudity is often linked in the Christian tradition with paradisiacal innocence. As we read in a Syrian text from the fifth century, "when the Scriptures say that 'they were both naked, and were not ashamed,' this means that they were unaware of their nudity, just like children."¹⁷ Though marked by Original Sin, children, insofar as they do not perceive their nudity, dwell in a sort of limbo, unaware of the shame that, according to Augustine, sanctions the appearance of the *libido*.

It is to this idea that we owe the practice (attested to—though not exclusively—by sources up to the sixteenth century) of reserving for boys (*pueri*) the privilege of singing during religious functions, almost as if their "white" voice (*voce bianca*) contained, in contrast to the "mutated" voices after puberty (*voces mutatae*), the signature of prelapsarian innocence. *Candida*, or white, is the color of the linen clothing that the baptized receive after they have removed the clothes that symbolized sin and death. "Wholly white," writes Jerome, "because it bears no trace of death, and so, after having been baptized, we can gird our loins in truth and cover all the shame of our past sins."¹⁸ But already in the first century Quintilian uses the word *candida* to describe an attribute of the human voice (though, naturally, he does not refer to children's voices). Thus, in the history of sacred music we see the attempt to ensure the persistence of the young voice by means of the castration of the choirboys (*pueri cantores*) before they have reached puberty. The "white voice" is the cipher of this nostalgia for a lost, Edenic innocence—for something that, like prelapsarian nudity, we no longer understand.

13. A perspicuous example of theological categories persisting in places where we least expect to encounter them occurs in Sartre. In the chapter from *Being and Nothingness* dedicated to the relationship with the Other, Sartre deals with the subject of nudity in connection with obscenity and sadism. He does so in terms so closely resembling Augustinian categories that—were the proximity not explainable by noting the common theological inheritance that infuses our entire vocabulary of corporeality—we might conclude that the connection was intentional.

Desire, according to Sartre, is above all a strategy directed toward making the "flesh" [*chair* in French, *carne* in Italian] appear in the body of the Other. Impeding this "incarnation" (another theological term) of the body are not so much the material clothes and the makeup that usually conceal it but rather the fact that the body of the Other is always "in situation": it is always already in the process of completing this or that gesture, this or that move-

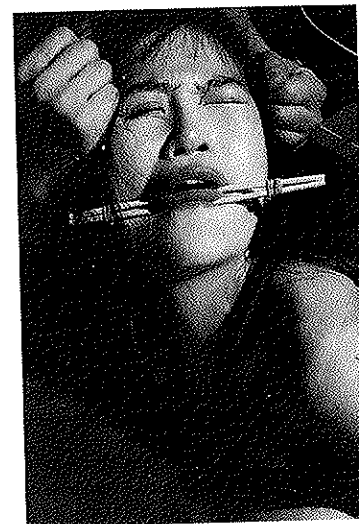
ment, with some goal in mind: "The Other's body is originally a body in situation; flesh, on the contrary, appears as the *pure contingency of presence*. Ordinarily, it is hidden by makeup, clothes, and so forth; but above all it is hidden by *movements*; nothing is less 'in the flesh' than a dancer, even if she is nude. Desire is an attempt to strip the body of its movements as of its clothes in order to make it exist as pure flesh; it is an attempt to achieve an *incarnation* of the Other's body."¹⁹

This being always already "in situation" of the Other's body is what Sartre calls "grace":

In *grace*, the body appears as a psychic being in situation. It reveals above all its transcendence, as a transcendence-transcended; it is in act and is understood in terms of the situation and of the end that it pursues. Each movement is apprehended in a perceptive process that goes from the present to the future. . . . It is this image of necessity and freedom in movement . . . that, strictly speaking, constitutes grace. . . . In grace the body is the instrument that manifests freedom. The graceful act, insofar as it reveals the body as a precision instrument, furnishes this body at each instant with its justification for existing.²⁰

Even the theological metaphor of grace as clothing that impedes the perception of nudity appears at this point: "Facticity, then, is clothed and disguised by grace: the nudity of the flesh is wholly present, but it cannot be *seen*. Thus the supreme coquetry, the supreme challenge of grace, is to exhibit the body unveiled with no clothing, with no veil except grace itself. The most graceful body is the naked body whose acts surround it with an invisible garment, hiding its flesh entirely, though it is completely present to the spectators' eyes."²¹

It is against this garment of grace that the sadist directs his strategy. The special incarnation that he wants to bring about is "the obscene," which is nothing other than the loss of grace: "The obscene is a *species* of Being-for-the-Other which belongs to the *genus* of the ungraceful [*disgracieux*]. . . . The ungraceful appears . . . when one of the elements of grace is thwarted in its real-



ization . . . when the body adopts postures that entirely strip it of its acts and reveal the inertia of its flesh."²² This is the reason why the sadist tries, in every possible way, to make the flesh appear, to force the body of the Other into incongruous positions that reveal its obscenity, that is, its irreparable loss of all grace.

14. Analyses that have deep—even if unintentional—theological roots are often very pertinent. In many countries a genre of sadomasochistic publications has recently spread, which first present the future victim elegantly dressed and in her usual context: smiling, strolling with her friends, or flipping through a magazine. Turning a few pages forward, the reader suddenly sees the same girl undressed, tied up, and forced to assume the most unnatural and painful positions, removing all grace even from the lineaments of her face, which are deformed and contorted by special instruments. The sadistic apparatus—with its straps, whips, and *poires d'angoisse*—is here the perfect profane equivalent of sin, which, according to theologians, removes the clothes of grace and brusquely liberates in the body the absence of grace that defines



“naked corporeality.” What the sadist tries to seize is nothing other than the empty shell of grace, the shadow that the “being in situation” (the dressed girl in the photographs on the next page), or the clothing of light, casts on the body. But precisely for this reason the desire of the sadist—as Sartre does not fail to note—is destined for failure, since he never manages to truly grasp in both hands the “incarnation” that he mechanically tries to produce. Certainly, the desired result seems to be achieved: the body of the Other is now



entirely obscene and breathless flesh, docilely holding the position dictated by the torturer [*carnefice*]; it seems to have definitively lost both freedom and grace. But it is exactly this freedom that necessarily remains unobtainable: “The more the sadist persists in treating the Other as an instrument, the more this freedom eludes him.”²³

The nudity, the “ungracefulness” that the sadist tries to seize in his victim, is (like Adam’s naked corporeality, according to theo-



gians) nothing other than the hypostasis and the evanescent support of freedom and grace. Nudity is that thing that must be presupposed as prior to grace in order for something like sin to occur. Naked corporeality, like naked life, is only the obscure and impalpable bearer of guilt. In truth, there is only baring, only the infinite gesticulations that remove clothing and grace from the body. Nudity in our culture ends up looking like the beautiful feminine nude that Clemente Susini created in wax for the Grand Duke of Tuscany's Museum of Natural History. One can remove the layers of this anatomical model one at a time, allowing first the abdominal and pectoral walls to appear, then the array of lungs and viscera still covered by the greater omentum, then the heart and



the intestines, until finally, inside the womb, one can make out a small fetus. But no matter how much we open the wax model and scrutinize it with our gaze, the naked body of the beautiful, disemboweled woman remains obstinately unobtainable. Hence the impurity, almost the sacredness, that seems to inhere in this wax model. Like nature, nudity is impure because it is accessible only by the removal of clothes (grace).

15. In November 1981 Helmut Newton published a diptych in *Vogue* that would soon become famous under the title "They Are Coming." On the magazine's left page we see four completely naked women (apart from their shoes, which the photographer apparently could not do without) walking in a cold and stiff manner, like models in a fashion show. The facing page to the right displays the same models in the very same positions, but this time they are immaculately dressed in elegant clothes. The singular effect produced

by this diptych is that, contrary to all appearances, the two images are actually the same. The models wear their nudity in exactly the same way that, on the opposite page, they wear their attire. Even if it is not likely that the photographer had a theological intent, certainly the nudity/clothing apparatus seems to be evoked here and, perhaps unintentionally, called into question. All the more so when, republishing the same diptych two years later in *Big Nudes*, Newton reversed the order of the images so that the dressed women precede the nude women, just as in Paradise the clothing of grace precedes the denudation. But even in this reversed order the effect remains unchanged: neither the eyes of the models nor the eyes of the spectator have been opened; there is neither shame nor glory, neither *pudenda* nor *glorianda*. The equivalence of the two images is further enhanced by the faces of the models, which express—as is the convention among fashion models—the same indifference in both photos. The face—which in the pictorial depictions of the Fall is the place where the artist represents the sorrow, shame, and dismay of the fallen couple (one thinks, above all, of Masaccio's fresco in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence)—acquires here the same gelid inexpressiveness: it is no longer a face.

In any case the essential point is that in Newton's diptych, as in Beecroft's performance, nudity has not taken place. It is as if naked corporeality and fallen nature, which had functioned as the theological presuppositions of clothing, have both been eliminated, and so denudation no longer had anything left to unveil. The only thing left is the fashion clothing, that is, an undecidable element between flesh and fabric, nature and grace. Fashion is the profane heir of the theology of clothing, the mercantile secularization of the prelapsarian Edenic condition.

16. In Genesis the fruit that Eve gives to Adam comes from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and is meant, according to the tempting words of the serpent, to "open their eyes" and communicate to them this knowledge ("When you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" [Gen. 3:5]). And indeed, the eyes of Adam and Eve are opened

immediately afterward, but what they then come to know is designated by the Bible only as nudity: "And the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked." The only content of their knowledge of good and evil is, therefore, nudity. But what is this first object and content of knowledge, this thing that we call nudity? What do we come to know by knowing nudity?

Commenting on the biblical passage in question, Rashi writes: "What does it mean 'they knew that they were naked'? It means that they possessed a single precept from God, and they stripped themselves of it."²⁴ *Genesis Rabbah* explains that Adam and Eve were deprived of the justice and glory that came with the observance of God's commandment. According to the apparatus that should be familiar to us by now, the knowledge of nudity leads back, once again, to a privation: the knowledge that something invisible and insubstantial (the clothing of grace, the justice that comes with the observance of the commandments) has been lost.

It is possible, however, to offer a different interpretation of this absence of content of humanity's first knowledge. That this first knowledge is devoid of content can, in fact, mean that it is not the knowledge of something but rather the knowledge of pure knowability. It means that to know nudity is not to know an object but only an absence of veils, only a possibility of knowing. The nudity that the first humans saw in Paradise when their eyes were opened is, then, the opening of truth, of "disclosedness" (*a-letheia*, "unconcealment"), without which knowledge would not be possible. The condition of no longer being covered by the clothing of grace does not reveal the obscurity of flesh and sin but rather the light of knowability. There is nothing behind the presumed clothing of grace, and it is precisely this condition of not having anything behind it, this pure visibility and presence, that is nudity. To see a body naked means to perceive its pure knowability beyond every secret, beyond or before its objective predicates.

17. This kind of exegesis is not completely unfamiliar to Christian theology. In the Eastern tradition, represented by Basil the Great and John of Damascus, the knowledge of nudity (*epignōsis*

tēs gymnotētos) signifies the loss of the condition of ecstasy and the blissful ignorance of self that defined the Edenic condition, as well as the consequent emergence in man of his wicked yearning to "fill his deficiencies" (*tou leipontos anaplerōsis*). Before sin, the first human beings lived in a state of idleness (*scholē*) and fullness. The true significance of the opening of the eyes is the closing of the eyes of the soul and the perception of one's own state of fullness and beatitude as a state of weakness and *atechnia* (that is, a lack of applied knowledge). Sin, then, does not reveal a lack or a defect in human nature, which the clothing of grace covered up. On the contrary, sin consists in perceiving the fullness that defined the Edenic condition as a lack.

If man had remained in Paradise, Basil writes, he would have owed his clothes neither to nature (as animals do) nor to a technical ability but only to the divine grace that responded to the love he had for God. By compelling humans to abandon their blissful Edenic contemplation, sin plunges them into the vain search for the technical knowledge and the sciences that distract them from the contemplation of God. According to this tradition, nudity does not refer to corporeality, as it does in Augustine and the rest of the Latin tradition, but rather to the loss of contemplation—that is, the knowledge of the pure knowability of God—and its substitution by applied and earthly knowledge. In fact, when God makes Adam fall asleep in order to remove his rib, Adam enjoys a state of perfect contemplation that culminates in ecstasy ("Through ecstasy," Augustine writes, "he participated in the angelic court and, by penetrating the sanctuary of God, he understood the mysteries").²⁵ The Fall is therefore not a fall of the flesh but of the mind. At stake in nudity and the loss of innocence is not this or that other way of making love but the hierarchy and modalities of knowledge.

18. Nudity—or rather denudation—as a cipher of knowledge, belongs to the vocabulary of philosophy and mysticism. This is the case not only because it relates to the object of supreme knowledge, that is, "naked being" (*esse autem Deum esse nudum sine velamine*

est), but also insofar as it relates to the very process of knowledge. In medieval psychology the medium of knowledge is called an image, or "phantasm," or species. The process that brings about perfect knowledge is therefore described as a progressive baring of this "phantasm," which—passing from the senses to the imagination to memory—is stripped little by little of its sensible elements in order to present itself, once the *denudatio perfecta* has been completed, as an "intelligible species," a pure intention or image. Through the act of intellection, the image becomes perfectly nude, and—Avicenna writes—"if it were not already naked, it would at any rate become so, because the contemplative faculty strips this image in such a way that no material affection can remain in it."²⁶ Complete knowledge is contemplation in and about nudity.

In one of Eckhart's sermons this connection between image and nudity is further developed in a way that turns the image (identified with "naked essence") into something like the pure and absolute medium of knowledge: "The image is a simple and formal emanation that transfuses in its totality the naked essence, which is how it is conceived by the metaphysician. . . . It is a life [*vita quaedam*] that can be conceived as something that begins to swell and tremble [*intumescere et bullire*] in itself and by itself, without however thinking at the same time about its expansion outwards [*necdum cointellecta ebullitione*]."²⁷ In Eckhart's terminology *bullitio* signifies the trembling or the internal tension of the object in the mind of God or of man (*ens cognitivum*), whereas *ebullitio* signifies the condition of real objects outside the mind (*ens extra anima*). The image, inasmuch as it expresses naked being, is a perfect medium between the object in the mind and the real thing. As such, it is neither a mere logical object nor a real entity: it is something that lives ("a life"); it is the trembling of the thing in the medium of its own knowability; it is the quivering in which the image allows itself to be known. "The forms that exist in matter," writes one of Eckhart's pupils, "tremble incessantly [*continue tremant*], like an ebullient strait between two seas [*tamquam in eurippo, hoc est in ebullitione*]. . . . This is the reason why nothing about them can be conceived of as certain or stable."²⁸

The nudity of the human body is its image—that is, the trembling that makes this body knowable but that remains, in itself, ungraspable. Hence the unique fascination that images exercise over the human mind. Precisely because the image is not the thing, but the thing's knowability (its nudity), it neither expresses nor signifies the thing. Nevertheless, inasmuch as it is nothing other than the giving of the thing over to knowledge, nothing other than the stripping off of the clothes that cover it, nudity is not separate from the thing: it is the thing itself.

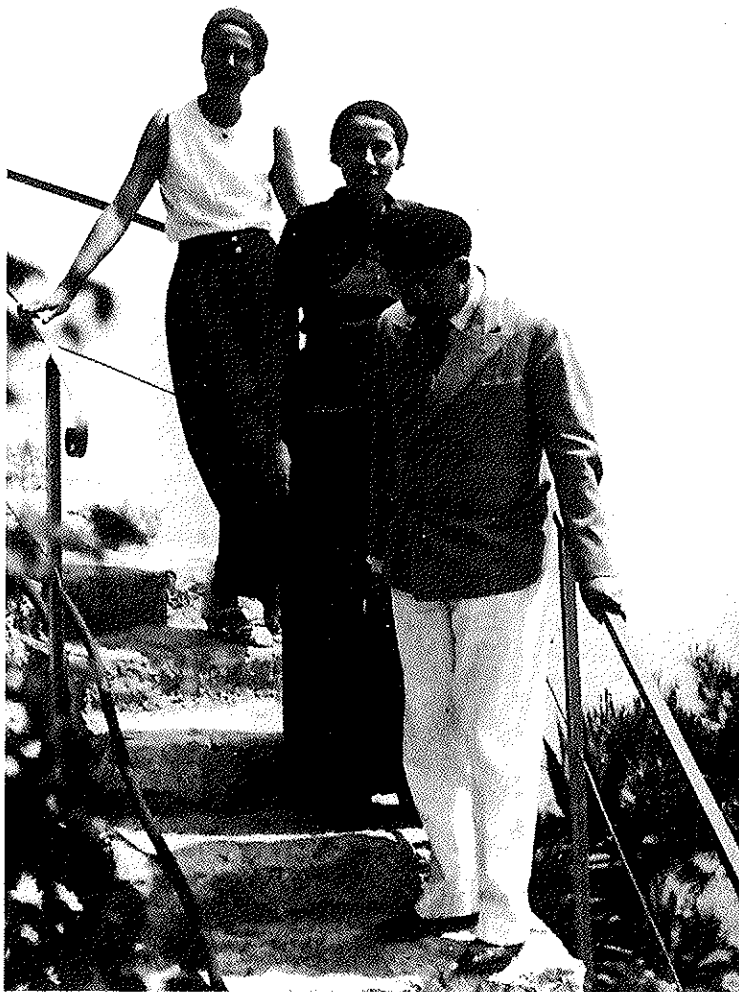
19. An attempt to think about nudity in all its theological complexity and, at the same time, to move beyond the theological perspective is accomplished in Walter Benjamin's work. Toward the end of his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, he examines the relationship in beauty between the veil and the veiled, appearance and essence, in connection with the character of Ottilia (whom Benjamin saw as a figuration of Julia Cohn, the woman whom he was in love with at the time). In beauty the veil and the veiled, the envelopment and the object that it envelops, are linked by a necessary relationship that Benjamin calls "secret" (*Geheimnis*). The beautiful, then, is that object for which the veil is essential. That Benjamin is aware of the theological depth of this thesis, which irrevocably links the veil to the veiled, is suggested by a reference to the "age-old idea" that the veiled is transformed by its unveiling, since it can remain "equal to itself" only underneath its envelopment. As a result beauty is in its essence an impossibility of unveiling; it is "non-unveilable" [*unenthüllbar*]:

Unveiled, the beautiful object would prove to be infinitely inapparent [*unscheinbar*]. . . . Thus, in facing whatever is beautiful, the idea of unveiling becomes the idea of its non-unveilability. . . . If only the beautiful, and nothing outside of it, can exist essentially as veiled and remain veiled, then the divine ground of beauty would lie in the secret. In beauty, appearance is just this: not the superfluous envelopment of things in themselves, but rather the necessary envelopment of things for us. Such veiling is divinely necessary at certain times, just as it is divinely established that an unveiling that takes place outside of

time leads the inapparent to vanish into nothing, whereupon revelation dissolves all secrets.²⁹

This law that inseparably unites veil and veiled within the sphere of beauty comes up unexpectedly short precisely when it confronts human beings and their nudity. Due to the unity that is formed between the veil and the veiled, Benjamin claims that beauty can exist as essence only where the duality of nudity and clothing no longer exists: in art and the phenomena of naked nature [bloßen Natur]: "On the contrary, the more clearly this duality expresses itself in order to finally be confirmed at its highest level in the human being, the more it becomes clear that in nudity without veils the essentially beautiful has vanished, and the naked body of the human being achieves an existence beyond all beauty—the sublime—and a work that goes beyond all creations—that of the creator."³⁰

In the human body, and particularly in Goethe's Ottilia—who is, in the novel, the paradigm of this pure appearance—beauty can only be apparent. Hence, while in works of art and of nature the applicable principle is that of "non-unveilability," in the living body the opposite principle is implacably affirmed: "nothing mortal is non-unveilable."³¹ Not only, then, does the possibility of being denuded condemn human beauty to appearance, but unveilability constitutes in some way its cipher: in the human body beauty is essentially and infinitely "unveilable"; it can always be exhibited as mere appearance. There is, however, a limit, beyond which exists neither an essence that cannot be further unveiled nor a *natura lapsa*. Here one encounters only the veil itself, appearance itself, which is no longer the appearance of anything. This indelible residue of appearance where nothing appears, this clothing that no body can wear anymore—this is human nudity. It is what remains when you remove the veil from beauty. It is sublime because, as Kant claims, the impossibility of presenting the idea through the senses is reversed at a certain point by a presentation of a higher order where what is being presented is, so to speak, presentation itself. It is in this way that, in nudity without veils,



appearance itself appears and displays itself as infinitely inapparent, infinitely free of secret. The sublime, then, is an appearance that exhibits its own vacuity and, in this exhibition, allows the inapparent to take place.

As a result, at the end of Benjamin's essay, it is precisely to ap-

pearance that "the most extreme hope" is entrusted, and the principle according to which it is absurd to desire the appearance of the good "suffers its unique exception."³² If beauty, in its most intimate condition, was once secret—that is to say, the necessary relation of appearance and essence, the veil and the veiled—then here appearance unties itself from this knot and shines for a moment by itself as the "appearance of the good." Accordingly, the light from this star is opaque, to be found only in certain Gnostic texts: no longer a necessary and "non-unveilable" envelopment of beauty, it is now appearance, *to the extent that nothing appears by means of this appearance*. The place where this inappearance—this sublime absence of the secret of human nudity—most prominently leaves its mark is the face.

20. At the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s Benjamin associated with a group of very attractive female friends. Among them were Gert Wissing, Ola Parem, and Eva Hermann, whom he thought all shared the same special relationship to appearance. In the diaries he kept during his stay on the French Riviera between May and June of 1931, Benjamin sought to describe this relationship, linking it with the theme of appearance that he had confronted some years before in his essay on Goethe's novel. "Speyer's wife," he writes,

reported this astounding statement by Eva Hermann, from the period of her greatest depression: "The fact that I am unhappy doesn't mean that I have to run around with a face full of wrinkles." This made many things clear to me, above all that the rudimentary contact that I have had in recent years with these creatures—Gert, Eva Hermann, and so on—is only a feeble and belated echo of one of the most fundamental experiences of my life: the experience of appearance [*Schein*]. I spoke yesterday with Speyer about this, who for his part also contemplated about these women and made the curious observation that they have no sense of honor, or rather that their code of honor is actually to say everything they think. This is a very true observation, and it proves the profundity of the obligation they feel toward appearance. For this "saying everything" is meant above all to destroy what has been said; or

rather, once it has been destroyed, to turn it into an object. Only insofar as it is apparent [*scheinhaft*] are they able to assimilate it.³³

One could define this attitude as the "nihilism of beauty," common to many beautiful women, which consists in reducing one's own beauty to pure appearance and then exhibiting this appearance with a sort of remote sadness, stubbornly denying the idea that beauty can signify something other than itself. But it is precisely the very lack of illusions about itself—this nudity without veils that beauty thus manages to achieve—that furnishes the most frightful attraction. This disenchantment of beauty, this special nihilism, reaches its extreme stage with the mannequins or the fashion models, who learn before all else to erase all expression from their faces. In so doing, their faces become pure exhibition value and, as a result, acquire a particular allure.

21. In our culture, the face-body relationship is marked by a fundamental asymmetry, in that our faces remain for the most part naked, while our bodies are normally covered. Corresponding to this asymmetry is the primacy of the head, which may be expressed in many ways but remains more or less constant in all fields: from politics (where the highest power is usually called the "head") to religion (Paul's cephalic metaphor of Christ), from art (where one can represent in a portrait the head without the body but not, as is evident from "nude" depictions, the body without the head) to everyday life, where the head is the locus of expressiveness par excellence. This last point seems to be confirmed by the fact that while the bodies of other animals often exhibit very lively and expressive signs (the pattern of the leopard's skin, the fiery colors of the mandrill's sexual organs, but also the butterfly's wings and the peacock's plumage), the human body is singularly devoid of any expressive features.

This expressive supremacy of the face finds its confirmation, as well as its point of weakness, in the uncontrollable blushing that attests to the shame we feel at being nude. This is perhaps the reason why the assertion of nudity seems to call the primacy of the face into question. That the nudity of a beautiful body can

eclipse the face, or make it invisible, is stated with great clarity in *Charmides*, the dialogue Plato dedicates to the subject of beauty. Charmides, the young man who lends his name to the dialogue, has a beautiful face, but, as one of the interlocutors comments, his body is so beautiful that "if he were to undress, you would believe that he had no face" (that he would be literally "faceless," *aprosōpos*, 154d). The idea that the nude body can contest the primacy of the face, to then offer itself as a face, is implicit in the response the women accused of witchcraft gave to those who wondered why they had kissed Satan's anus during the Sabbath: their defense was that even there, there is a face. Similarly, in the first stages of erotic photography, models had to affect a romantic and dreamy expression, as if the unseen lens had surprised them in the intimacy of their boudoir. But in the course of time this procedure was inverted, to the effect that the face's only task became the expression of the shameless awareness that the naked body was being exhibited to the gaze. Barefacedness [*sfacciataggine*, etymologically, the loss of the face] is now the necessary counterpart to nudity without veils. The face, now an accomplice of nudity—as it looks into the lens or winks at the spectator—lets the absence of secret be seen; it expresses only a letting-be-seen, a pure exhibition.

22. A miniature in one of the manuscripts of the *Clavis physicae* by Honorius of Autun shows a character (perhaps the author) holding a ribbon on which is written: "*Involucrum rerum petit is sibi fieri clarum*" (He who tries to clarify the envelopment of things).³⁴ One could define nudity as the envelopment that reaches a point where it becomes clear that clarification is no longer possible. It is in this sense that we must understand Goethe's maxim, according to which "beauty can never clarify itself."³⁵ Only because beauty remains to the end an "envelopment," only because it remains "inexplicable" [etymologically, that which cannot be unfolded], can appearance—which reaches its supreme stage in nudity—be called beautiful. That nudity and beauty cannot be clarified does not therefore mean that they contain a secret that cannot be brought to light. Such an appearance would be mysteri-

ous, but precisely for this reason it would not be an envelopment, since in this case one could always continue to search for the secret that is hidden within it. In the inexplicable envelopment, on the other hand, there is no secret; denuded, it manifests itself as pure appearance. The only thing that the beautiful face can say, exhibiting its nudity with a smile, is, "You wanted to see my secret? You wanted to clarify my envelopment? Then look right at it, if you can. Look at this absolute, unforgivable absence of secrets!" The matheme of nudity is, in this sense, simply this: *haecce!* there is nothing other than this. Yet it is precisely the disenchantment of beauty in the experience of nudity, this sublime but also miserable exhibition of appearance beyond all mystery and all meaning, that can somehow defuse the theological apparatus and allow us to see, beyond the prestige of grace and the chimeras of corrupt nature, a simple, inapparent human body. The deactivation of this apparatus retroactively operates, therefore, as much on nature as on grace, as much on nudity as on clothing, liberating them from their theological signature. This simple dwelling of appearance in the absence of secrets is its special trembling—it is the nudity that, like the choirboy's "white" voice, signifies nothing and, precisely for this reason, manages to penetrate us.

§ 8 The Glorious Body

1. The problem of the glorious body, that is to say, the nature and characteristics—and more generally the life—of the body of the resurrected in Paradise, is the paramount chapter in theology, and is classified in the literature under the rubric *de fine ultimo*. Nevertheless, the Roman Curia, in order to settle on its compromise with modernity, decided to close in a rather hasty manner the eschatological door that leads to the discussion concerning "last things," or rather, it froze this—if not obsolete, then at least certainly cumbersome—discussion. But as long as the dogma of the resurrection of the flesh persists as an essential part of the Christian faith, this impasse cannot but remain problematic. In the pages that follow we will revive this frozen theological theme and thus examine a problem that is equally inescapable: that of the ethical and political status of corporeal life (the bodies of the resurrected are numerically and materially the same as the ones they had during their earthly existence). This means that the glorious body will serve as a paradigm that will allow us to meditate on the figures, and the possible uses, of the human body as such.

2. The first problem that theologians have to confront is the identity of the resurrected body. Supposing that the soul will have to take on the same body once again, how then can its identity and integrity be defined? A preliminary question involves the

age of the resurrected: must they rise again at the age at which they died, decrepit as decrepit, baby as baby, adult as adult? Man, Thomas Aquinas responds, must be resurrected with no natural defects. But the nature of an individual can also be defective as a result of not having yet reached its perfection (as happens with babies) or as a result of having left its perfect state behind (as happens with the elderly). The resurrection will therefore bring everybody back to the perfection that coincides with their youth, that is to say, Christ's age when he was resurrected (*circa triginta annos*). Paradise is a world for those in their thirties, invariably balanced between growth and decay. Apart from this, however, the bodies will maintain the differences that once distinguished them from one another, first and foremost (contrary to those who claim that, since the feminine condition is imperfect, the resurrected would all be males) their sexual differences.

3. Much more insidious is the question of the material identity between the body of the resurrected and the body that dwelled on earth. How is one to conceive of the integrated identity of each and every last particle of matter between the two bodies? Will each speck of dust that the body has decomposed into return to the same place it used to have in the living body? Here is precisely where the difficulty begins. We could certainly grant that the amputated hand of a thief—who later on repented and was redeemed—would rejoin his body at the moment of resurrection. But what about Adam's rib, which was removed from his body in order to form Eve's body: will it be resurrected in his glorious body or hers? And what about the case of the anthropophagus: will the human flesh that he has eaten and assimilated into his own body be resurrected in the body of his victim or his own?

One of the hypotheses that put the subtlety of the Church Fathers to the greatest test dealt with the scenario of an anthropophagus who eats nothing but human flesh, or even only embryos, and then begets a son. According to medieval science, semen is generated *de superfluo alimenti*, by an excess or surplus of digested food. This means that the same flesh will belong to more than one

body (that of the devoured and that of the son) and will therefore have to be resurrected, impossibly, in different bodies. For Aquinas the solution to this last case gives rise to a Solomonic split:

The embryos as such will not take part in the resurrection if they did not first live as rational souls. But at this stage the maternal womb already adds new nourishment to the substance of the semen. Consequently, assuming that someone were to eat such human embryos, and then procreate by means of the surplus of such food, the substance of the semen would rise again in him who was begotten by it, unless this semen did not contain elements belonging to the substance of the semen of those whose flesh was devoured, as such elements would rise again in the former and not in the latter. The remainder of the eaten flesh, which was not transformed into semen, will clearly rise again in the first individual, while the divine power will intervene in order to supply the missing parts.¹

4. Origen offers a more elegant and less muddled solution to the problem of the identity of the resurrected. That which remains constant in each individual, he suggests, is the image (*eidōs*) that we continue to recognize every time we encounter the individual, despite inevitable changes. This same image will also guarantee the identity of the resurrected body: "As our *eidōs* remains identical from infancy to old age, even though our material features undergo a continuous mutation, so in the same manner, it is this *eidōs* that we had throughout our earthly existence that will be resurrected and remain identical in the world to come, though it has been changed for the better and become more glorious." The idea of such an "imaginary" resurrection, like many other of Origen's themes, was suspected of heresy. Nevertheless, the obsession with an integral material identity was progressively replaced by the idea that each part of the human body remains immutable as far as its aspect (*species*) is concerned, though it is in a continuous ebb and flow (*fluere et refluere*) as far as its material composition is concerned. "And so in the parts that compose a man," Aquinas writes, "the same thing happens that occurs in the population of a city, where single individuals die and others come to take their

place. From a material point of view, the components that compose the populace succeed one another, but formally the populace remains the same. . . . In like manner, in the human body there are also parts that, in their ebb, are replaced by others that take the same shape and position, and so materially all the parts ebb and flow, while numerically man remains identical."² The paradigm of paradisiacal identity is not material sameness, which police departments around the world try to set today through biometric apparatuses, but rather the image, that is to say, the body's likeness to itself.

5. Once the shared identity of the glorious body and the earthly body is guaranteed, it remains to be ascertained what distinguishes the one from the other. Theologians enumerate four characteristics of glory: impassibility, subtlety, agility, and clarity.

That the body of the blessed is impassible does not mean that it has no capacity to sense, which is an inseparable part of the body's perfection. Without this capacity, the life of the blessed would resemble a kind of sleep; that is to say, it would be half of a life (*vitae dimidium*). Impassibility means, rather, that the body will not be subjected to those disordered passions that wrest it from its perfection. All the parts of the glorious body will be, in fact, submissive to the dominion of the rational soul, which will in turn be perfectly submissive to the divine will.

Some theologians, however, scandalized by the idea that there could be something to smell, taste, or touch in Paradise, exclude all the senses from the paradisiacal condition. Aquinas, along with the majority of the Church Fathers, rejects such an amputation. The sense of smell of the blessed would not be deprived of an object: "Does not the Church say in its songs that from the bodies of the saints emanate a gentle scent?"³ In its sublime state, the odor of the glorious body will be, in fact, deprived of any material humidity, as happens in the exhalations of distilled fumes (*sicut odor fumalis evaporationis*). And so the nose of the blessed, not hindered by any such humidity, will then perceive the smallest nuances (*minimas odorum differentias*). Taste will also be exercised,

though there will be no need for food, perhaps because "on the tongue of the elect there will be a delicious humor."⁴ And touch will perceive particular qualities in bodies that seem to anticipate those immaterial properties of images that modern art historians call "tactile values."

6. How are we to understand the "subtle" nature of the glorious body? According to a position that Aquinas deems heretical, subtlety—as a sort of extreme rarefaction—renders the bodies of the blessed similar to air or wind and thus penetrable by other bodies. They are so impalpable that they are indistinguishable from a breath or a spirit. Such a body could therefore simultaneously occupy the space already occupied by another body, whether this other body is glorious or not. Against such excesses the prevalent opinion defends the view that the perfect body has an extended and palpable character. "The Lord will be revived with a glorious body, but he will still be palpable, as it is written in the Gospel: 'feel me [*palpate*] and see me, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones.' And so the glorious bodies will also be palpable."⁵ Nevertheless, since they are fully subjected to the spirit, they can also decide not to impress their touch and, by a supernatural virtue, remain impalpable to nonglorious bodies.

7. Agile is that which aptly moves effortlessly and uninhibitedly. In this sense the glorious body, perfectly submissive to the glorified soul, will be endowed with agility, and "in all its movements and in all its acts it will be ready to swiftly obey the spirit."⁶ Once again, contrary to those who contend that the glorious body can move from one place to another without passing through the space in between, the theologians reaffirm their position that this would contradict the nature of corporeality. But against those who conceive of movement as a kind of corruption, as almost an imperfection of the body (as far as its place is concerned), and thus endorse the immobility of the glorious bodies, theologians valorize agility as a sort of grace that carries the blessed almost instantly and effortlessly wherever they want to go. Like dancers, who move

in space with neither aim nor necessity, the blessed move in the heavens only in order to exhibit their agility.

8. Clarity (*claritas*) can be thought of in two ways: like the shimmer of gold (due to its density) or like the splendor of crystal (because of its transparency). According to Gregory the Great, the bodies of the blessed possess clarity in both senses: they are diaphanous like a crystal and impervious to light like gold. It is this halo of light, which emanates from the glorious body, that can be perceived by a nonglorious body, and its splendor can differ according to the quality of the blessed. The greater or lesser clarity of the halo is only the outermost index of the individual differences between the glorious bodies.

9. Impassibility, subtlety, agility, and clarity—as characteristics and almost ornaments of the glorious body—do not present any particular difficulties. At stake in each case is the assurance that the blessed have a body and that this body is the same as the one that the individual had on earth, even if it is incomparably better. The far more arduous and decisive problem is the way in which this body exercises its vital functions, that is to say, the articulation of a physiology of the glorious body. The body, as we have seen, is resurrected as a whole, with all the organs it possessed during its earthly existence. Therefore, the blessed will forever have, according to their sex, either a virile member or a vagina and, in both cases, a stomach and intestines. But what for, if, as seems obvious, they will need neither to reproduce nor to eat? Certainly blood will circulate in their arteries and veins, but is it possible that hair will still grow on their heads and faces or that their fingernails will grow, as well, pointlessly and irritatingly? In confronting these delicate questions, theologians come up against a decisive aporia, one that seems to exceed the limits of their conceptual strategy but that also constitutes the locus in which we can think of a different possible use for the body.

10. The problem of the resurrection of hair and nails (body

parts that few theologians, it would seem, considered suitable to the paradisiacal condition) is treated by Aquinas just before he confronts the equally embarrassing problem of the resurrection of the bodily humors (blood, milk, black bile, sweat, sperm, mucus, urine, and so forth). The animate body is called “organic” because the soul makes use of its various parts as if they were instruments. Among these parts, some are necessary in order to exercise a function (the heart, the liver, the hands), while others are meant to preserve the necessary organs. Examples of the second kind are hair and nails, which will be resurrected in the glorious body since they contribute in their own way to the perfection of human nature. The perfectly depilated body of the fashion model and the porn star is extraneous to glory. Nevertheless, since it is difficult to imagine celestial hair and nail salons, we must assume (though theologians fail to address the matter) that just as the age of the blessed will forever remain the same, so will the length of their hair and nails.

As for the humors, Aquinas’s solution demonstrates that already in the thirteenth century the Church was trying to harmonize theological and scientific demands. Some of the humors—including urine, mucus, and sweat—are in fact extraneous to the perfection of the individual, insofar as they are residues that nature expels *in via corruptionis*: they will not, therefore, be resurrected. Others are useful only in order to preserve the species in another individual, by means of procreation (sperm) and nutrition (milk). It is not expected that these humors will be resurrected, either. The other humors familiar to medieval medicine—above all the four that define the body’s temperaments: blood, black bile or melancholy, yellow bile, and phlegm, which were later joined by *ros*, *cambium*, and *gluten*—will be resurrected in the glorious body, since they are directed toward its natural perfection and are inseparable from it.

11. It is with regard to two principal functions of vegetative life—sexual reproduction and nutrition—that the problem of the physiology of the glorious body reaches its critical threshold. If

the organs that execute these functions—testicles, penis, vagina, womb, stomach, intestines—will necessarily be present in the resurrection, then what function are they supposed to have? “The end of procreation is to multiply the human race, while the end of nutrition is the restoration of the individual. After the resurrection, however, the human race will reach the perfect number that had been preordained by God, and the body will no longer undergo either diminution or growth. Procreation and nutrition will therefore no longer have any reason for being.”⁷

It is impossible, though, that the corresponding organs are completely useless and superfluous (*supervacanei*), since in the state of perfect nature nothing exists in vain. It is here that the question of the body’s other use finds its first, stammering formulation. Aquinas’s strategy is clear: to separate organs from their specific physiological functions. The purpose of each organ, like that of any instrument, is its operation; but this does not mean that if the operation fails, then the instrument becomes useless (*frustra sit instrumentum*). The organ or instrument that was separated from its operation and remains, so to speak, in a state of suspension, acquires, precisely for this reason, an ostensive function; it exhibits the virtue corresponding to the suspended operation. “The instrument serves not only to execute the agent’s operation, but also to show its virtue [*ad ostendendam virtutem ipsius*].”⁸ Just as in advertisements or pornography, where the simulacra of merchandise or bodies exalt their appeal precisely to the extent that they cannot be used, but only exhibited, so in the resurrection the idle sexual organs will display the potentiality, or the virtue, of procreation. The glorious body is an ostensive body whose functions are not executed but rather displayed. Glory, in this sense, is in solidarity with inoperativity.

12. Is it possible, then, to speak of a different use of the body, on the basis of the glorious body’s useless or unusable organs? In *Being and Time*, instruments that are out of use—for example, a hammer that is broken, and thus inoperative—leave the concrete sphere of *Zuhandenheit*, of being-at-hand, where they are always ready for a

possible use, and enter the sphere of *Vorhandenheit*, of mere availability with no aim. This, however, does not imply another use for the instrument; it simply suggests its being present outside of any possible use, which the philosopher likens to an alienated conception of Being that is dominant in our day. Like those human instruments scattered around the feet of the melancholic angel in Dürer’s engraving, like toys abandoned by children after playtime, objects separated from their use become enigmatic and even unnerving. In the same way, the eternally inoperative organs in the bodies of the blessed—even if they exhibit the procreative function that belongs to human nature—do not represent another use for those organs. The ostensive body of the elect, no matter how “organic” and real it may be, is outside the sphere of any possible use. There is perhaps nothing more enigmatic than a glorious penis, nothing more spectral than a purely doxological vagina.

13. Between the years 1924 and 1926 the philosopher Alfred Sohn-Rethel lived in Naples. By observing the behavior of fishermen grappling with their little motorboats, and drivers trying to start their run-down cars, he came to formulate a theory of technology that he called in jest “Philosophy of the Broken” (*Philosophie des Kaputten*).⁹ According to Sohn-Rethel, a thing begins to function for a Neapolitan only when it is unusable. By this he means that a Neapolitan only begins to really use technical objects at the moment when they no longer function. An intact thing that functions well on its own irritates Neapolitans, so they usually avoid it. And yet, by shoving a piece of wood in the right spot, or by making a slight adjustment with a smack of the hand at the right moment, Neapolitans manage to make their apparatuses work according to their desires. This behavior, Sohn-Rethel comments, contains a higher technological paradigm than our current one: true technology begins when man is able to oppose the blind and hostile automatism of the machines and learns how to move them into unforeseen territories and uses, like that young man on the street in Capri who transformed a broken motorcycle engine into a device that makes whipped cream.

In this example the engine continues to spin on some level but from the perspective of entirely new desires and new needs. Inoperativity is not left here to its own devices but instead becomes the opening, the "open-sesame," that leads to a new possible use.

14. In the glorious body it became possible for the first time to conceive the separation of an organ from its physiological function. But the possibility of discovering another use of the body—which this separation allows us to glimpse—has remained unexplored. In its place we find glory, understood as the isolation of inoperativity in a special sphere. The exhibition of the organ separated from its exercise or the empty repetition of its function have no aim other than the glorification of God's work, exactly as the arms and insignias exhibited by the victorious general in the Roman triumph are the signs and, at the same time, the effectuation of his glory. The sexual organs and the intestines of the blessed are only the hieroglyphs or the arabesques that divine glory inscribes onto its own coat of arms. The earthly liturgy, like the celestial one, does nothing other than incessantly capture inoperativity and displace it into the sphere of worship *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* (for the greater glory of God).

15. In his treatise *The Ultimate End of Human Life* a twentieth-century French theologian poses the question of whether it is possible to attribute to the blessed the full exercise of their vegetative life. For understandable reasons he is particularly interested in the nutritive faculty (*potestas vescendi*). He argues that corporeal life essentially consists in the functions of vegetative life. The perfect restitution of corporeal life that will take place in the resurrection cannot fail to entail, therefore, the exercise of such functions. "Indeed," he writes, "it seems reasonable that the vegetative potentiality not only fails to be abolished among the elect, but that in some marvelous [*mirabiliter*] way it actually increases."¹⁰ The paradigm of this persistence of the nutritive function in the glorious body is the meal that the resurrected Jesus shares with his disciples (Luke 24:42–43). With their usual innocent pedantry theologians

ask themselves whether the broiled fish that Jesus ate was also digested and assimilated and whether the residues of his digestion were eventually evacuated from his body. A tradition that dates back to Basil of Caesarea and the Fathers of the Eastern Church affirms that the food eaten by Jesus—during his life and after the resurrection—was so completely assimilated into his body that no elimination of its residues was necessary. Another opinion asserts that in the glorious body of Christ, just as in the bodies of the blessed, food is immediately transformed into a spiritual nature by means of a sort of miraculous evaporation. This, however, implies (and Augustine was the first to draw this conclusion) that glorious bodies—beginning with Jesus's—while not requiring nutrition of any kind, maintain in some way their *potestas vescendi*. In a sort of gratuitous act, or a kind of sublime snobbery, the blessed will eat and digest their food without having any need to do so.

In reply to the objection that, since excretion (*deassimilatio*) is as essential as assimilation, there will be a conversion of matter from one form to another in the glorious body—and therefore also a form of corruption and vileness (*turpitude*)—the above-mentioned theologian affirms that there is nothing in itself vile in the operations of nature: "As no part of the human body is in itself unworthy of being elevated to the life of glory, so no organic operation needs to be considered as unworthy to participate in such a life. . . . It is a product of false imagination to believe that our corporeal life would be more worthy of God to the extent that it differs from our present condition. God does not destroy natural laws by means of his supreme gifts; rather, with his ineffable wisdom, he completes and perfects these laws."¹¹ There is a glorious defecation, which takes place only in order to show the perfection of natural functions. But as far as its possible use is concerned, the theologians remain silent.

16. Glory is nothing other than the separation of inoperativity into a special sphere: that of worship or liturgy. In this way what was merely a threshold that granted access to a new use is transformed into a permanent condition. A new use for the body

is thus possible only if it wrests the inoperative function from its separation, only if it succeeds in bringing together within a single place and in a single gesture both exercise and inoperativity, economic body and glorious body, function and its suspension. Physiological function, inoperativity, and new use all persist in the body's single field of tension, a field from which they cannot be separated. This is because inoperativity is not inert; on the contrary, it allows the very potentiality that has manifested itself in the act to appear. It is not potentiality that is deactivated in inoperativity but only the aims and modalities into which its exercise had been inscribed and separated. And it is this potentiality that can now become the organ of a new possible use, the organ of a body whose organicity has been suspended and rendered inoperative.

To use a body, and to make it serve as an instrument for a particular purpose, are not the same thing. Nor are we dealing here with a simple and insipid absence of a purpose, which often leads to a confusion of ethics and beauty. Rather, at stake here is the rendering inoperative of any activity directed toward an end, in order to then dispose it toward a new use, one that does not abolish the old use but persists in it and exhibits it. This is precisely what amorous desire and so-called perversion achieve every time they use the organs of the nutritive and reproductive functions and turn them—in the very act of using them—away from their physiological meaning, toward a new and more human operation. Or consider the dancer, as he or she undoes and disorganizes the economy of corporeal movements to then rediscover them, at once intact and transfigured, in the choreography.

The naked, simple human body is not displaced here into a higher and nobler reality; instead, liberated from the witchcraft that once separated it from itself, it is as if this body were now able to gain access to its own truth for the first time. In this way the mouth truly becomes a mouth only as it is about to be kissed; the most intimate and private parts become a place for shared use and pleasure; habitual gestures become the illegible writing whose hidden meaning the dancer deciphers for all. Insofar as an organ and an object have potentiality, their use can never be individual

and private but only common. And just as, according to Benjamin, the sexual fulfillment that renders the body inoperative severs the bond that ties man to nature, so the body that contemplates and exhibits its potentiality through its gestures enters a second, final nature (which is nothing other than the truth of its former nature). The glorious body is not some other body, more agile and beautiful, more luminous and spiritual; it is the body itself, at the moment when inoperativity removes the spell from it and opens it up to a new possible common use.

§ 9 Hunger of an Ox: Considerations on the Sabbath, the Feast, and Inoperativity

1. That there is a special relationship between the feast and inoperativity is evident in the Jewish Sabbath.¹ The feast day par excellence of the Jews—for whom it is the paradigm of faith (*yesod ha-emunah*) and in some way the archetype for every day of celebration—finds its theological paradigm in the fact that it is not the work of creation, but rather the cessation of all work that is declared sacred:

On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and on the seventh day he ceased from all his work. God blessed the seventh day and consecrated it, because on this day he ceased from all the work of his creation. (Gen. 2:2–3)

Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it. For six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. (Exod. 20:8–10)

The condition of the Jews during the celebration of the Sabbath is thus called *menuchah* (in the Greek of the Septuagint and of Philo, *anapausis* or *katapausis*), that is to say, inoperativity. This condition does not concern only humans; rather, it is a joyous and perfect reality that defines the very essence of God (“Only God,” Philo writes, “is truly an inoperative being. . . . The Sabbath, which means inoperativity, is God’s Sabbath”).² When Jeho-

vah evokes the object of eschatological awaiting in the Psalms, he says of the impious that “they shall not enter into my inoperativity” (Ps. 95:11).

As a result the rabbinical tradition has devoted itself (with its usual meticulousness) to defining the types of work that are not permissible during the Sabbath. The *Mishnah* lists thirty-nine such activities (*melachot*) from which Jews must take every care to abstain: from reaping and sowing to baking and kneading, from weaving and unraveling threads to tanning hides, from writing to lighting fires, from carrying things to untying knots. As a matter of fact, according to the extensive interpretation of the oral tradition, the *melachot* coincide with the entire sphere of labor and productive activity.

2. This does not mean that human beings must abstain from every sort of activity during the celebration of the Sabbath. The decisive question is whether the activity aims toward production. Indeed, according to the Jewish tradition, an act of pure destruction that has no constructive implication does not constitute *melachah* and is not considered a transgression of the Sabbath repose (for this reason festive behaviors, even beyond Judaism, often involve a joyous and, at times even violent, exercise of destruction and squandering). And so, if lighting fires and cooking are prohibited, the spirit of *menuchah* nonetheless finds a particular expression in the consumption of meals—an activity to which, as with any feast day, we give a very special attention and care (the Sabbath consists of at least three festive meals). Generally speaking, the entire sphere of licit behaviors and activities—from the most common everyday gestures to hymns of celebration and praise—is invested with that indefinable emotive tonality that we call “festiveness.” In the Judeo-Christian tradition this particular mode of shared doing and living is expressed in the commandment (whose significance we seem to have completely forgotten in our day) to “sanctify the feasts.”³ The inoperativity that defines the feast is not mere inertia or abstention; it is, rather, a sanctification, that is to say, a particular modality of acting and living.

3. Despite the faint air of nostalgia that still surrounds the feast day, it is all too obvious that it cannot be experienced today entirely in good faith. In this spirit Kerényi compared the loss of festivity to the condition of a person who wants to dance but can no longer hear the music. We continue to perform the same gestures our grandparents taught us—to abstain more or less completely from labor, to prepare with more or less care the Christmas turkey or the Easter lamb, to smile, give gifts, and sing—but in reality we no longer hear the music; we no longer know how to “sanctify.” And yet we are not able to give up our celebrations, so we continue to pursue on every possible occasion (even beyond the official holidays) this peculiar—and lost—modality of acting and living that we call “celebrating.” We insist on dancing, making up for the loss of music with the noise of discos and loudspeakers; we continue to squander and destroy—even, and increasingly often, life itself—though we are no longer able to reach *menuchah*, the simple, but for us impracticable, inoperativity that could alone restore meaning to the feast. But why is inoperativity so difficult and so inaccessible for us? And what is this attribute of human living and acting that we call festiveness?

4. In his *Convivial Questions* Plutarch relates having witnessed at Cheronea a feast called “expulsion of bulimia.” “There is an ancestral feast,” he writes, “celebrated by the archon at the public altar and by all the citizens in their own homes. It is called ‘expulsion of bulimia’ [*boulimou exelasis*]. They chase away from their homes one of their slaves by striking him with a staff made from the chaste tree, while shouting: ‘out with bulimia, in with wealth and health.’”⁴ *Boulimos* means in Greek “hunger of an ox.” Plutarch informs us that a similar feast also existed at Smirne, where in order to chase away the *boubrostis* (“eating like an ox”), a black bull was sacrificed complete with its entire skin.

To understand what was truly at stake in these feasts, it is first necessary to free oneself from the false assumption that these were attempts to propitiate the gods in order to achieve material prosperity and abundance of food. That this has nothing at all to do

with the meaning of the above feasts is proved beyond all doubt by the fact that what is chased away is not hunger and famine but rather the “hunger of an ox”: the beasts’ continuous and insatiable eating (symbolized by the ox, with its slow and uninterrupted rumination). Chasing away the “bulimic” slave means, then, expelling a certain form of eating (devouring or engorging like wild beasts in order to satiate a hunger that is by definition insatiable), and thus clearing a space for another modality of eating, one that is human and festive, one that can begin only once the “hunger of an ox” has been expelled, once the bulimia has been rendered inoperative and sanctified. Eating, in this respect, is not a *melachah*, an activity directed toward an aim, but an inoperativity and *menuchah*, a Sabbath of nourishment.

5. In modern languages the Greek term for the hunger of an ox has been preserved in medical terminology, where it has come to designate an eating disorder that, since the end of the 1970s, has become common in opulent societies. The symptomology of this disorder (which appears at times in connection with its symmetrical opposite, anorexia nervosa) is characterized by recurring orgies of eating, by the sensation of losing control during the binge, and by induced vomiting immediately after the bulimic episode. Eating disorders, which come to be sporadically observed in the second half of the nineteenth century, acquire the characteristics of an epidemic only in our time. Yet it has been noted that, in the religious sphere, these disorders find their precursors in ritual fasting (the medieval “anorexic saints”), as well as in the opposite of ritual fasting: banquets that are linked to feasts (the English phrase “eating binges,” which the DSM uses to define bulimic episodes, originally referred to excessive eating during festive celebrations, and there are celebrations, such as Ramadan, that seem to consist of a pure and simple ritual alternation between anorexia and bulimia, fasting and feasting).

From this perspective it is possible to view bulimia nervosa as linked in some fashion to its eponymous festival described by Plutarch. Just as the slave, chased away from the home with a staff

made from the chaste tree, personified with his own body the hunger of an ox—a kind of hunger that had to be removed from the city in order to make way for festive eating—so bulimics, with their insatiable appetite, live in their very flesh the hunger of an ox that has become impossible to expel from the city. Often obese, insecure, incapable of self-control, and for this reason (unlike the anorexic) subjected to the condemnation of society, the bulimic is the useless scapegoat for the impossibility of an authentic festive behavior in our time—the unusable residue of a purifying ceremony, the meaning of which has been lost to contemporary society.

6. There is, however an aspect of the bulimic's behavior that seems to attest, at least in part, to the memory of a cathartic demand. I am referring to vomiting, an act that the bulimic performs either mechanically, by inserting two fingers down the throat, or by taking emetics and purgatives (it is precisely this latter practice that can put a patient's life at risk, as in the famous case of the singer Karen Carpenter, who died as a result of abusing emetics). From the very first studies on bulimia, the recourse to vomiting has been considered an integral part of the diagnosis, even though a small percentage of bulimics (around 6 percent) do not resort to this practice. Attributing this self-willed nausea to a preoccupation with gaining weight (chiefly among female patients) does not seem a satisfactory explanation. In reality, by throwing up what was eaten a moment prior during the binge, bulimics seem to undo and render inoperative their hunger of an ox, thereby in some way purifying themselves of it. For a moment—even if all alone, and with the absolute incomprehension of other human beings, in the eyes of whom vomiting seems even more reproachable than binge-eating—the bulimic seems to unconsciously take on the cathartic function that the slave happily performed for the citizens of Cheronea (and it is precisely in relation to this regulated alternation of excessive eating and vomiting, sin and expiation, that in a book significantly entitled *Responsible Bulimia*, the author could claim to have practiced bulimia “consciously and successfully” for a good number of years).

7. Animal voracity and human dining, which ritual behaviors necessarily represent as two distinct moments, are in reality inseparable. If at Smirne the expulsion of the *boubrostis* (of eating like an ox) coincided with the sacrifice of the ox and the ritual meal, so also at Cheronea the sacrifice (Plutarch calls it *thysia*)—insofar as it was followed by a public banquet—seems essentially to have consisted of the hunt of the *boulimos*, that is to say, of rendering inoperative the hunger of an ox that undeniably occurs in the human body itself. In a similar manner it is as if the bulimic patient—vomiting food immediately after having swallowed it, almost without realizing it—were really vomiting and devouring at the same time, vomiting and rendering inoperative the same animalistic hunger.

This intermingling between animal and man, between the hunger of an ox and festive nourishment, contains a precious teaching about the relationship between inoperativity and the feast that I have proposed to make intelligible. Inoperativity (this, at least, is the hypothesis that I intend to suggest) is neither a consequence nor a precondition (the abstention from labor) of the feast day but coincides with festiveness itself in the sense that it consists precisely in neutralizing and rendering inoperative human gestures, actions, and works, which in turn can become festive only in this way (celebrating [*far festa*], in this sense, literally involves killing [*fare la festa*], consuming, deactivating, and finally, eliminating something).

8. That the Sabbath—that every feast—is not simply a day of repose that is added to the workweek (as our calendars would have it), but signifies a special time and a special activity, is implicit in the very narration of Genesis, where repose and completion of work coincide on the seventh day (“on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and on the seventh day he ceased from all his work”). Precisely in order to underline the immediate continuity—and, at the same time, the heterogeneity—between work and repose, the author of the commentary known as *Genesis Rabbah* writes: “Man of flesh and blood, who knows

not his times, his moments, and his hours, takes something from profane time and adds it to sacred time; but the Holy One, blessed be his name, who knows his times, his moments, and his hours, entered the Sabbath by a hair's breadth."⁵ And it is in the same sense that one must read the assertion of another commentator, according to which "the precept of the Sabbath is equivalent to all the precepts of the Torah," and that the observance of the Sabbath "brings about the coming of the Messiah."⁶ All this means that the repose of the Sabbath is not a simple abstention, unrelated to the precepts and actions of the other days of the week; it corresponds, rather, to the perfect fulfillment of the commandments (the coming of the Messiah signifies the definitive fulfillment of the Torah, its becoming inoperative). For this reason the rabbinical tradition sees the Sabbath as a small part of the messianic kingdom and an anticipation of it. The Talmud expresses with its usual bluntness this essential kinship between the Sabbath and the *olam habbah*, the time to come: "Three things anticipate the time to come: the sun, the Sabbath, and *tashmish* [a word that signifies either sexual union or defecation]."⁷

How should we understand, then, the relationship of proximity and almost reciprocal immanence between Sabbath, work, and inoperativity? In his commentary on Genesis, Rashi harkens back to a tradition according to which even on the Sabbath something was created: "After the six days of creation, what was still missing from the universe? *Menuchah* [inoperativity, rest]. The Sabbath came, the *menuchah* came, and the universe was complete."⁸ Even inoperativity belongs to creation; it is a work of God. But it is a very special work, as it were, which consists in rendering inoperative, in putting to rest all the other works. Rosenzweig expresses this heterogeneous contiguity between the Sabbath and creation when he writes that it is at once both the feast of creation and the feast of redemption or, more precisely, that in the Sabbath we celebrate a creation that was destined for redemption (that is, for inoperativity) from the very beginning.

9. The feast day is not defined by what is not done in it but

instead by the fact that what is done—which in itself is not unlike what is accomplished every day—becomes undone, rendered inoperative, liberated and suspended from its "economy," from the reasons and aims that define it during the weekdays (and not doing, in this sense, is only an extreme case of this suspension). If one eats, it is not done for the sake of being fed; if one gets dressed, it is not done for the sake of being covered up or taking shelter from the cold; if one wakes up, it is not done for the sake of working; if one walks, it is not done for the sake of going someplace; if one speaks, it is not done for the sake of communicating information; if one exchanges objects, it is not done for the sake of selling or buying.

Every feast day involves, in some measure, this element of suspension and begins primarily by rendering inoperative the works of men. In the Sicilian feast of the dead described by Pitré, the dead (or an old woman called Strina, from *strena*, a Latin name for the gifts exchanged during the festivities of the beginning of the year) steal goods from tailors, merchants, and bakers to then bestow them on children (something similar to this happens in all feasts that involve gifts, like Halloween, where the dead are impersonated by children). Presents, gifts, and toys are objects with use and exchange value that are rendered inoperative, wrested from their economy. In every carnivalesque feast, such as the Roman saturnalia, existing social relations are suspended or inverted: not only do slaves command their masters, but sovereignty is placed in the hands of a mock-king (*saturnalicius princeps*) who takes the place of the legitimate king. In this way the feast reveals itself to be first and foremost a deactivation of existing values and powers. "There are no ancient feasts without dance," writes Lucian, but what is dance other than the liberation of the body from its utilitarian movements, the exhibition of gestures in their pure inoperativity?⁹ And what are masks—which play a role in various ways in the feasts of many peoples—if not, first and foremost, a neutralization of the face?

10. This does not mean that the human activities that the feast

has suspended and rendered inoperative are necessarily separated and transported into a more elevated and solemn sphere. It is possible, in fact, that this separation of the feast into the sacred sphere, which certainly came about at a certain point, was the work of the Church and the clergy. We should, perhaps, try to invert the familiar chronology according to which religious phenomena are placed at the origin, only to be secularized later on, and instead hypothesize that what comes first is the moment in which human activities are simply neutralized and rendered inoperative during the feast. What we call "religion" (a term that, in its current meaning, is missing from ancient culture) intervenes at that moment by capturing the feast in a separate sphere. Lévi-Strauss's hypothesis—which reads the fundamental concepts by which we usually think of religion (*mana*, *wakan*, *orenda*, *taboo*, and the like) as excessive signifiers that are in themselves empty, and precisely for this reason can be laden with any sort of symbolic content—gains, from this perspective, an even wider meaning. Signifiers with "zero symbolic value" may correspond to human actions and objects that the feast emptied out and rendered inoperative and that religion then came to separate and recodify through its ceremonial apparatus.¹⁰

At any rate, whether festive inoperativity precedes religion or results from the profanation of its apparatuses, what is essential here is a dimension of praxis in which simple, quotidian human activities are neither negated nor abolished but suspended and rendered inoperative in order to be exhibited, as such, in a festive manner. Thus, the procession and the dance exhibit and transform the simple gait of a human body walking, the gift reveals an unexpected possibility within the products of economy and labor, and the festive meal renews and transfigures the hunger of an ox. The aim is not to render these activities sacred and untouchable but, on the contrary, to open them to a new—or more ancient—possible use in the spirit of the Sabbath. The blunt and derisive language of the Talmud—which speaks in the same breath of the Sabbath and sexual union (or defecation) as a pledge of the time to come—demonstrates here its utter seriousness.

§ 10 The Last Chapter in the History of the World

In the marionette, or in God.

—Heinrich von Kleist, "The Puppet Theatre"

The ways in which we do not know things are just as important (and perhaps even more important) as the ways in which we know them. There are ways of not knowing—carelessness, inattention, forgetfulness—that lead to clumsiness and ugliness, but there are others—the unselfconsciousness of Kleist's young man, the enchanting *sprezzatura* of an infant—whose completeness we never tire of admiring. On the one hand, repression is the name psychoanalysis gives to a way of not knowing that often produces inauspicious effects in the life of the one who does not know. But, on the other hand, we call beautiful a woman whose mind seems happily unaware of a secret that her body is perfectly attuned to. There are, then, successful ways of not knowing oneself, and beauty is one of them. It is possible, in fact, that the way in which we are able to be ignorant is precisely what defines the rank of what we are able to know and that the articulation of a zone of nonknowledge is the condition—and at the same time the touchstone—of all our knowledge. If this is true, then a *catalogue raisonné* of the modes and types of ignorance would be just as useful as the systematic classification of the sciences on which we base the transmission of knowledge. And yet, while humans have reflected for centuries on how to preserve, improve, and ensure their knowledge, we lack even the elementary principles of an art of ignorance. Epistemology and the science of method investigate and establish the

conditions, paradigms, and statutes of knowledge, but there is no recipe for articulating a zone of nonknowledge. Indeed, articulating a zone of nonknowledge does not mean simply not knowing; it is not only a question of lack or defect. It means, on the contrary, maintaining oneself in the right relationship with ignorance, allowing an absence of knowledge to guide and accompany our gestures, letting a stubborn silence clearly respond for our words. Or, to use an obsolete vocabulary, we could say that what is most intimate and nourishing does not take the form of science and dogma but of grace and testimony. The art of living is, in this sense, the capacity to keep ourselves in harmonious relationship with that which escapes us.

Even knowledge, in the final analysis, maintains a relationship with ignorance. But it does so through repression or, in an even more effective and potent way, presupposition. The unknown is that which knowledge presupposes as the unexplored country to be conquered; the unconscious is the darkness into which consciousness will have to carry its light. In both cases something gets separated in order to then be permeated and attained. The relationship with a zone of nonknowledge, on the other hand, keeps watch over this zone so that it will remain as is. This is done not by exalting its darkness (as in mysticism), not by glorifying the arcane (as in liturgy), and not even by filling it with phantasms (as in psychoanalysis). At issue here is not a secret doctrine or a higher science, nor a knowledge that we do not know. Rather, it is possible that the zone of nonknowledge does not really contain anything special at all, that if one could look inside of it, one would only glimpse—though this is not certain—an old and abandoned sled, only glimpse—though this is not clear—the petulant hinting of a little girl inviting us to play. Perhaps a zone of nonknowledge does not exist at all; perhaps only its gestures exist. As Kleist understood so well, the relationship with a zone of nonknowledge is a dance.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. *The Tosefta: Nashim*, trans. J. Neusner (New York: Ktav, 1979), 201.
2. Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm Shahrastānī, *Livre des religions et des sectes*, vol. 2, trans. J. Jolivet and G. Monnot (Paris: Peeters/Unesco, 1993), 130–31.
3. Shahrastānī, *Livre des religions et des sectes*, 131.
4. Dante Alighieri, *La vita nuova*, trans. B. Reynolds (London: Penguin, 1969), 74.
5. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Werke und Briefe*, vol. 2, ed. F. Beissner and J. Schmidt (Frankfurt: Insel, 1969), 880.

Chapter 2

1. This essay takes up a text prepared for the inaugural lecture of a course in Theoretical Philosophy, 2006–7, the Faculty of Arts and Design, the University IUAV of Venice.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Abuses of History to Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60.
3. Translators’ note: Here and elsewhere Agamben uses *mannequin* in the less familiar sense of “living fashion model,” though the more common sense of “dummy” is quite suggestive.
4. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 66.

Chapter 3

1. Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. B. Mitchell (New York: Schocken, 1998), 3.
2. Davide Stimilli, "Kafka's Shorthand," a conference paper delivered at the Warburg Institute in London, May 20, 2006.
3. Kafka, *The Trial*, 14: "I can't report that you've been accused of anything, or more accurately, I don't know if you have."
4. *Ibid.*, 224.
5. Franz Kafka, *The Great Wall of China and Other Pieces*, trans. W. Muir and E. Muir (London: M. Secker, 1933), 245-46.
6. Kafka, *The Trial*, 213.
7. *Ibid.*, 94.
8. Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. M. Harman (New York: Schocken, 1998), 252.
9. Kafka, *The Trial*, 106.
10. Franz Kafka, *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*, trans. E. Kaiser and E. Wilkins (New York: Schocken, 1954), 308.
11. Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, trans. P. Boehm (New York: Schocken, 1990), 214-15.
12. *Ibid.*, 201.
13. *Ibid.*, 198.
14. Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1988), 156.
15. *Ibid.*, 150.
16. *Ibid.*, 145.
17. *Ibid.*, 165.
18. Kafka, *The Trial*, 226.
19. *Ibid.*, 230.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, 213.
22. Kafka, *Dearest Father*, 87.
23. Kafka, *The Trial*, 215.
24. *Ibid.*, 215, 217.
25. *Ibid.*, 216.
26. Hyginus Gromaticus, "De limitibus constituendis," in *Die Schriften der römischen Feldmesser*, vol. 1, ed. F. Blume, K. Lachmann, and A. Rudorff (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1848), 166.
27. Kafka, *The Castle*, 8.
28. *Ibid.*, 4.

29. Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, vol. 2, ed. M. Brod (New York: Schocken, 1949), 202.
30. *Ibid.*, 202-3.
31. *Ibid.*, 218-19.
32. Kafka, *The Castle*, 59: "The boundaries of our small holdings have been marked out, everything has been duly registered."
33. Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. S. A. Barney and W. J. Lewis (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 311.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, 172.

Chapter 4

1. Manfredo Tafuri, "Le forme del tempo: Venezia e la modernità," in *Università IUAV di Venezia, Inaugurazioni accademiche, 1991-2006* (Venice: IUAV, 2006).
2. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. H. V. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 358.

Chapter 5

1. Translators' note: We follow here Daniel Heller-Roazen's more precise but less natural renditions of *potenza* as "potentiality" and *impotenza* as "impotentiality," though it is helpful to bear in mind the simpler notions of "power" and "powerlessness."

Chapter 6

1. Epictetus, *The Handbook*, trans. N. P. White (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 16.
2. Epictetus, *The Discourses*, trans. R. Dobbin (London: Penguin, 2008), 72.
3. Translators' note: Although Daniel Heller-Roazen's rendering of *nuda vita* as "bare life" is certainly warrantable, we translate it hereafter as "naked life" for reasons that the next chapter will make clear.

Chapter 7

1. Erik Peterson, "Theology of Clothes," *Selection*, vol. 2, ed. C. Hastings and D. Nicholl (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954), 54-55.

2. *Ibid.*, 56.
3. *Ibid.*, 55.
4. *Ibid.*, 57–58.
5. Saint Jerome, Epistle 64.19; see Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Garments of Shame,” in *Map Is Not Territory* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 17.
6. Saint Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 615.
7. 2 Timothy 1:9; Saint Augustine, *Christian Instruction*, in *The Fathers of the Church: Augustine*, vol. 4, trans. J. J. Gavigan (New York: CIMA, 1947), 159.
8. Peterson, “Theology of Clothes,” 56–57.
9. “The grace of God is nothing at all except our own nature with free will” (Saint Augustine, *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. J. A. Mourant and W. J. Collinge [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992], 154).
10. Saint Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, 615.
11. *Ibid.*, 617.
12. *Ibid.*, 624–26.
13. *Ibid.*, 626–27.
14. *Ibid.*, 629.
15. *The Gospel According to Thomas*, trans. A. Guillaumont et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 23.
16. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, “Mystagogical Lectures,” in *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, vol. 2, trans. L. P. McCauley and A. A. Stephenson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1970), 161–62.
17. Theodore of Mopsuestia; quoted in Smith, “The Garments of Shame,” 19.
18. Quoted in Smith, “The Garments of Shame,” 17.
19. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. H. E. Barnes (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 506.
20. *Ibid.*, 519.
21. *Ibid.*, 520.
22. *Ibid.*, 519–20.
23. *Ibid.*, 525.
24. *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary: Genesis*, ed. A. M. Silbermann (Jerusalem: Routledge, 1973), 13.
25. Saint Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis,” in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill (New York: New City Press, 2002), 396–97.

26. Avicenna, *Liber de anima, seu, Sextus de naturalibus*, vol. 1, ed. S. van Riet (Louvain: Peeters, 1972), 94–95.
27. Meister Eckhart, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke: Die lateinischen Werke*, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1994), 425–26 (Latin Sermon 49).
28. See Vladimir Lossky, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1973), 117n73.
29. Walter Benjamin, “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 351.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, 353.
32. *Ibid.*, 355.
33. Walter Benjamin, “May-June 1931,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, ed. M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland, and G. Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 480.
34. Honorius Augustodunensis, *Clavis Physicae*, ed. P. Lucentini (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1974), illustration 1.
35. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, trans. E. Stopp (London: Penguin, 1998), 29.

Chapter 8

1. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols. (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), 5:2887.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 2897.
4. *Ibid.*, 2899.
5. *Ibid.*, 2906.
6. *Ibid.*, 2907.
7. *Ibid.*, 2891–92.
8. *Ibid.*, 2882.
9. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Das Ideal des Kaputten* (Bremen: Wassmann, 1990).
10. Vitus de Broglie, *De fine ultimo humanae vitae* (Paris: Beauchesne et ses fils, 1948), 285.
11. *Ibid.*, 293–94.

Chapter 9

1. Translators' note: The Italian *fiesta* encompasses a broader semantic field than any of the comparable English terms: *feast*, *festival*, *holiday*, *party*, or *celebration*. In this context *feast* should bring to mind a periodic and ritualistic celebration rather than a sumptuous meal.
2. Philo, "On the Cherubim," in *Philo*, vol. 2, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), 61.
3. Translators' note: The commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exod. 20:8), is rendered in its mnemonic Italian version as "Ricordati di santificare le feste."
4. Plutarch, *Moralia*, vol. 8, trans. P. A. Clement and H. B. Hoffleit (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 495–97.
5. *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: A New American Translation*, vol. 1, trans. J. Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 107.
6. *The Zohar*, vol. 4, trans. D. C. Matt (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 504.
7. *The Talmud of Babylonia: An Academic Commentary*, vol. 1, trans. J. Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 338.
8. *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Megillah*, trans. M. Simon (London: Soncino, 1984), 9a.
9. Lucian, "The Dance," in *Lucian*, vol. 5, trans. A. M. Harmon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 229.
10. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Works of Marcel Mauss*, trans. F. Bajer (London: Routledge, 1987), 64.

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